The Secret of the Creek

By Victor Bridges

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THE SECRET OF THE CREEK

BY

VICTOR BRIDGES

Author of "The Man from Nowhere," "The Cruise of the Scandal," "Mr. Lyndon at Liberty," "The Lady from Long Acre," "Greensea Island," "The Red Lodge," "The Girl in Black."

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To

THE SKIPPER
THE MATE
THE CREW
AND THE PASSENGER

OF

WATERLILY

THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED

"Then down the all-golden water-ways
His feet flew after yesterdays."

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CHAPTER I

"AS far as I'm concerned, Mr. Skinner," I said, "you can go to hell."

My visitor leaned back in his chair, staring at me resentfully out of his little rat-like eyes.

"Is that all you have to say to me?" he demanded.

I reflected for a moment.

"And stop there," I added.

He rose to his feet, his naturally sallow face flushed with anger.

"Very well, Mr. Cameron," he muttered, "you may think you're very funny and clever, but I'll be even with you before I've finished."

I got up also, and, walking to the door, threw it open.

"Unless you're out of this house in five seconds," I said, "I'll chuck you down the steps."

Clutching his hat in his hand, he sidled quickly through into the hall, and with a hasty jerk drew back the latch of the front door.

The next minute he was standing on the pavement, looking back at me over the little iron gate which divided my miniature garden from Campden House Road.

"You great hulking swine!" he snarled. "You'll get what's coming to you and a bit over."

I took a step towards him, and with the alacrity of a weasel he vanished down the hill in the direction of Kensington High Street.

More amused than annoyed, I sauntered forward as far as the gate.

It was a beautiful June evening, warm, still, and peaceful, and, leaning against the top rail, I began in a leisurely fashion to fill my pipe.

I was engaged in this task, and pondering at the same time over my late visitor's amazing cheek, when the familiar figure of Peter West swung into view round the corner of Vicarage Gardens.

"Hullo!" he exclaimed, as he crossed the road. "Waiting for the post?"

"You're just too late, Peter," I said, opening the gate. "If you'd rolled up a minute earlier you'd have caught me in the act of firing out your predecessor."

He took off his hat, and ran his fingers through his thick crop of untidy black hair.

"My predecessor?" he repeated. "What on earth do you mean?"

"Well," I said, "you're not the first caller I've had this evening. I've been entertaining a gentleman called Mr. Skinner, and it's only by the grace of God that I haven't broken his neck."

Peter smiled in his usual slow sombre fashion.

"Why don't you pay the man?" he inquired.

"He wasn't a dun," I said. "Come along inside and I'll tell you all about it."

I led the way into my pleasant, book-lined study, which looked out into the garden. A tray containing whisky and soda and some glasses was standing on the table, and, dropping down into a neighbouring armchair, Peter automatically pulled it towards him.

"You're a pugnacious beggar, Jim," he observed. "Fancy getting cross with anyone in this weather!"

"I didn't get cross," I objected. "Considering what I had to put up with, I behaved like a perfect gentleman."

He took a long sip, and with a contented sigh set down his tumbler.

"Go ahead," he remarked. "I'm just in the right mood for listening to a good story."

"It's not exactly a story," I said; "all the same, it's a devilish odd business; in fact, the more I think about it the queerer it seems." I paused. "The day before yesterday," I added, "I bought a book."

"I've known you do that before," said Peter.

"Don't interrupt," I returned. "I happened to be coming down Charing Cross Road, and I dropped in at Wiltshire's for a look round. The old man himself was out, but his assistant, who knows me by sight, took me upstairs and showed me about two dozen Elizabethan

and Jacobean books which had just come in. Amongst them was a first edition of Coryat's *Crudities*."

"Never heard of it," said Peter. "Sounds like a collection of modern verse."

"It's a volume of travels," I explained, "published in 1611. It has been reprinted since, but the first edition is pretty scarce. Wiltshire was only asking twenty-five pounds for it, so I bought it then and there and carried it home with me."

"Twenty-five pounds for an out-of-date book of travel!" exclaimed Peter. "My dear chap, you ought to see a doctor."

"It was a very good investment," I protested. "I could get a handsome profit on it from an American collector any day. Besides, you wait until you've heard the end of the story."

"I'm waiting hopefully," said Peter. "It's been a bit dull so far, but I suppose you haven't really warmed up."

"I was sitting in here after dinner," I continued, ignoring his interruption, "when this chap Skinner rang the front door bell and asked Mrs. Higgins whether he could see me. I told her to bring him in, and he turned out to be an oily-tongued sort of merchant with a face like a ferret. He said that Wiltshire had given him my address, and that he'd called to find out if I was willing to part with the Coryat. He offered me thirty-five pounds for it."

There was a pause.

"And knowing you," said Peter, "I'll bet you refused."

"Yes," I said, "I did. I can't exactly explain why, but I had a feeling that there was something fishy about it. He didn't look the least like a book collector, and, apart from that, in spite of the price he offered, he gave me the impression that in some way or other he was trying to do me down."

Peter, who was beginning to appear interested, leaned forward in his chair.

"Well, what happened?" he demanded.

"He tried to bargain with me. He went up as high as forty-five, and even fifty pounds, and of course that made me more suspicious than ever. When he saw that there was nothing doing he suddenly got nasty."

"How do you mean?"

"He actually had the cheek to threaten me. He hinted that unless I agreed to his terms I should probably find myself in trouble. I told him to go to hell."

"And did he?" inquired Peter gravely.

"He started off downhill, anyhow," I said. "He could only have been just out of sight when you came round the corner." I moved over to the table and helped myself to a drink. "How does it strike you?" I asked. "I can't help thinking that there must be something queer at the back of it."

He sat silent for a moment, his hands in his

trouser pockets and his legs stretched out in front of him.

"Are you quite sure about the value of this book?" he asked.

"Quite," I said. "I'm pretty well up in that sort of thing. The top price that's ever been paid for a copy, even in America, is forty-one pounds."

"But how about this particular copy?" he persisted. "Perhaps it's got some special history of its own? Supposing it belonged to Shakespeare, for instance—there are plenty of mutts who'd be ready to give two or three hundred for it."

"A bright idea, Peter," I said, laughing, "but I'm afraid there's nothing in it. As a matter of fact, the name of the original owner is written on the inside of the cover. You can have a look at it yourself."

I stepped to the bookcase, and, taking out the well-worn quarto volume, dumped it down on the table in front of him.

"There you are," I said. "'Henry Franklyn, 1613.' That disposes of William, at all events."

He studied the signature for a moment or two, and then turned over the engraved title-page.

"Hullo!" he exclaimed suddenly. "Have you noticed this?"

"Noticed what?" I inquired.

He pointed to the blank space at the back, where, in the same old-fashioned sloping

hand, was written the following inscription:

"To my sonne
Iteeyetefhfrobesoelf."

"Imagine having a son with a name like that!" he remarked. "I wonder what he called him when he was in a hurry?"

"It can't be a name," I objected. "It's probably a sentence of some kind in cipher. They were rather given to that sort of thing in the seventeenth century."

"Cipher!" he repeated, staring at it thoughtfully. "I say, d'you think it could possibly have anything to do with this chap's anxiety to get hold of the book?"

The same idea had suddenly crossed my own mind, and, bending forward, I examined the letters again with renewed interest.

"There's just a chance that it might," I said slowly. "If we could only get at the meaning——" I paused. "I tell you what, Peter," I added, "I'll bring it along with me in the boat, and we'll have a shot at trying to work it out. It will be something to amuse ourselves with in the evening."

"*You* can, if you like," he retorted. "I'm going to spend my spare time eating and sleeping. This is the first week-end I've had since March, and you don't catch me wasting it in guessing riddles." He pushed aside the volume, and, picking up his tumbler, finished off its

contents. "That reminds me," he continued. "Is there anything I can provide in the way of food or drink?"

I shook my head. "I've seen to all that," I said. "There's a barrel of beer and plenty of tinned stuff on board, and Fortnum's are putting me up a hamper, which I'm going to call for to-morrow afternoon. What time will you be down?"

"I can't get to Leigh till about seven," he answered. "We're expecting a visit from a party of American and Canadian doctors next week, and I've a lot of arrangements to fix up."

"Well, we must see what sort of an evening it is," I said. "We can drop down on the ebb, and unless there's a dead calm we ought to fetch up somewhere or other."

"I shouldn't be surprised if the weather changed completely," announced Peter. "The glass has fallen at least an inch." He paused. "What part of the world are you thinking of making for?"

"It's all the same to me," I replied. "Ramsgate, Orford, Lowestoft. If you've any special fancy, just give it a name."

"I'm not particular," said Peter; "as long as you shove me ashore Monday I don't care a damn where we are." He got up, and, with a prodigious yawn, stretched his arms.

"You're not going?" I protested. "Why, there's half a bottle of whisky left."

"I think I'd better be pushing off. I've had

a strenuous day of it, and I've got to begin early again to-morrow. I merely wanted to make sure about your plans."

"That's all settled, then," I said. "I'll be on board about five, and I'll get everything straight before you turn up. With any luck we ought to have a fairly cheerful time."

"You bet," returned Peter heartily. "I only wish to goodness I could come more often."

I accompanied him as far as the gate, and, having dispatched him on his way, strolled back into the house. I was in the act of bolting the front door when Mrs. Higgins emerged from the kitchen.

"Is there anything you want before I go to bed, sir?" she inquired.

"Nothing, thanks," I said. "Oh, by the way, I'm a little suspicious about that man Skinner who came here to-night. I'd never seen him before, and I've got an idea that he's a bit of a wrong 'un. If he happens to call again while I'm away, don't on any account let him in."

"Certainly not, sir," she replied almost reprovingly. "I shouldn't dream of doing such a thing, especially with a person of that description."

"I'm sure you wouldn't," I agreed. "Only the fellow seems such a plausible rascal, I thought it best to warn you."

I wished her good night, and, having finished

locking up, re-entered the peaceful atmosphere of my study. As usual, I looked round with a feeling of contented proprietorship.

Pessimists are fond of asserting that the mere act of acquiring any object, however attractive, immediately begins to rob it of its charm. "Man is but man," said Mr. Crabbe; "the thing he most desires pleases at first, then pleases not, then tires." Whether I am differently constituted, or whether the curse in question had not yet had time to operate, I really can't say, but so far the pleasure which I found in my new home had certainly shown no sign of evaporating.

It was now exactly eighteen months since the sudden death of my uncle had unexpectedly placed me in possession of Campden Cottage, together with a snug little income of just over a thousand a year. I had not been slow to take advantage of his kindness. Resigning my clerkship in the Home Office, which I detested, I had promptly exchanged my two dreary rooms in Ebury Street for this charming backwater of Kensington, where I had settled down happily to pursue my favourite hobby —the study of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century literature.

Being blessed with comparatively simple tastes, I had no desire for any more money. Mrs. Higgins, who was a real treasure in the way of housekeepers, looked after my domestic arrangements with surprising economy. Thanks

to her disinterested labours, I found myself at the end of each month with a generous surplus in hand, a sum which I devoted chiefly to buying books, and running an eight-ton cutter which I kept moored at Leigh.

Sailing had always appealed to me, and almost the first use I had made of my legacy had been to purchase *The Skylark*. She was a splendid sea boat, built originally for a fishing-smack, and had been carefully looked after by her previous owner. Though at a pinch I could manage her by myself, she was really too big for single-handed cruising, and as a general rule I endeavoured to dig up some pal who shared my enthusiasm for the Essex mud-flats.

Among this cheery crowd, much as I liked them all, Peter West was undoubtedly my most welcome sailing-partner. We had known each other ever since we had turned up on the same day at Haileybury as two forlorn new boys, and the friendship we had formed there had been sufficiently genuine to survive all the chances and changes of thirteen years.

Peter, who was the son of a doctor and had gone in for medicine, had done exceptionally well in his own line. He now held a Government appointment at the School of Tropical Diseases, where he had already established a considerable reputation by his patient and successful pursuit of obscure microbes.

Unfortunately, the work, to which he was

devoted, allowed him precious little time for anything else. On rare occasions, such as the present, when he was able to snatch a well-earned week-end, he would invariably join me for a short cruise in *The Skylark*. He was a good hand in a boat, as well as being a first-rate companion, and I think we both looked forward with equal enjoyment to these all-too-infrequent excursions.

I was pondering pleasantly over our approaching trip when the clock on the mantelpiece chimed out a quarter to eleven. Deciding that I might as well turn in, I picked up the volume of Coryat, which was lying on the table, and, switching off the lights in the study and the hall, mounted the staircase that led up to my bedroom.

One of the consoling points about being a bachelor is the fact that one can read for as long as one likes before dropping off to sleep. To my mind a book never seems more attractive than when one is propped up comfortably against the pillows, with a final pipe in one's mouth and a softly shaded light at one's elbow. In some ways it is perhaps the best hour of the whole twenty-four, and I often think that its charm may explain why great book-lovers like Lord Macaulay and Mr. Swinburne so persistently evaded their duty.

It was with a leisurely, but none the less a very lively, interest that I settled down to examine my latest purchase. I was fairly well acquainted

with its contents, having dipped into them several times in the course of my reading at the British Museum, but Peter's discovery on the back of the title-page, combined with the remarkable incident of Mr. Skinner, had been more than sufficient to stimulate my curiosity.

Turning to the faded inscription, I studied it again with the closest attention. From the similarity of the handwriting and the spelling of the word " sonne " it seemed highly probable that the composer of this apparently meaningless jumble of letters was the same Henry Franklyn to whom the book had originally belonged.

I wondered what kind of a person its long-dead owner had been. In 1613 James the First still had twelve years of his weak and pig-headed reign to run, but, if Henry Franklyn had then been a young man, he might well have lived on into the troubled days of the Civil War. In that case there would be nothing very surprising in the discovery of a message in cipher addressed by him to his son. The defeated and scattered Royalists had doubtless often been driven to communicate with each other by some such method, and a blank page in an old book was just the sort of place which might easily have been selected for that purpose.

It was a fascinating theory at least, and the more I thought it over the keener became my desire to ferret out the meaning of these mysterious letters. Was it possible that they

supplied the clue to Mr. Skinner's extraordinary anxiety to get possession of the book? If such were the case, he must clearly be under the impression that they contained a secret of some practical value. No one except a wealthy student of the period would be willing to throw away thirty-five pounds for the mere pleasure of trying to unravel a three-hundred-year-old conundrum, and, whatever walk of life my late visitor might adorn, he had certainly not conveyed the idea of being either rich or educated.

It was quite conceivable that if there were any descendants of Henry Franklyn still alive, this message might be of considerable importance. Supposing that Skinner had got to hear of its existence, and was endeavouring to make use of his knowledge for some underhand purpose of his own? Now that I came to think of it, his appearance was exactly in keeping with this particular type of enterprise. He had just that furtive and cunning manner which one associates with the born crook, and, although I wasn't much impressed by his threats, they had been sufficiently venomous to prove that, given the chance, he would be a thoroughly dangerous rascal.

For some time I continued to puzzle over the letters, trying half a dozen different theories in turn, all of which appeared to be equally futile. At last, becoming tired of the problem, I began in a desultory way to turn over the pages,

stopping occasionally to dip into the text wherever an interesting-looking paragraph happened to catch my eye.

I was half way through a peculiarly entertaining passage, which described how Bishop Hatto was eaten alive by mice, when a faint sound, like the tinkle of broken glass, suddenly attracted my attention. With an involuntary start, I raised myself from the pillow. Almost inaudible as the noise had been, I somehow or other felt certain that it had come from downstairs.

Checking my first impulse to fling back the clothes and jump out of bed, I remained quite still, listening intently. Through the open window I could hear the rumble of distant traffic, but inside the house, except for the ticking of my watch, everything was as quiet as the grave. Glancing at the time, I saw that it was a few minutes after midnight.

I allowed one or two more seconds to slip by before I attempted to make a movement. Then very cautiously I pushed down the sheet, and the next moment, bare-footed and clad only in my pyjamas, I was tiptoeing my way across the carpet. With infinite care I opened the door, and, standing on the threshold, peered down into the dimness of the hall. At first I could distinguish nothing, but little by little my eyes became accustomed to the gloom. I had just made out the familiar shape of the hat-rack and the big oak chest in the corner when

the utter silence was broken by a fresh sound which sent the blood drumming through my heart. It was the unmistakable click of a key turning in a lock.

Against the wall, at the end of the landing, stood a small table, containing several pieces of old English china and a couple of heavy brass candlesticks. I advanced noiselessly towards it, and, having armed myself with one of these useful weapons, crept back again to the head of the banisters. Then, very gingerly, and taking the utmost pains to avoid any warning creak, I began to descend the staircase.

The study was on the opposite side of the hall, not more than half a dozen paces from the bottom step. My bare feet made no sound on the polished flooring, and, reaching the door, I stooped down and put my ear against the keyhole.

Somebody was moving stealthily about inside the room.

CHAPTER II

ONE should never allow oneself to be ruffled, even by a burglar, but for once in a way my temper suddenly got the better of me.

Retreating two or three steps, and drawing in a deep breath, I hunched up my shoulder and hurled myself against the panel. It takes

a very good lock to stand up against thirteen stone, and with a splintering crash the door flew open. It flew open, indeed, rather too abruptly. I just caught the gleam of an electric torch and heard a startled oath from the darkness beyond; then, still clutching the brass candlestick in my fist, I stumbled forward on to my hands and knees.

I was up again in an instant, but, quick as I was, the gentleman with the torch was a shade quicker. Before I could regain my feet he had glided across the room with the swiftness of a cat, and, wrenching aside the curtain, leaped out through the open window.

It was only a four-foot drop on to the lawn, and, without a second's hesitation, I followed his lead. I landed on the grass just as he reached the gate, when for the first time I was able to get a clear sight of him. Judging by his back view, he was a taller man than Skinner—a slim, active-looking person with a muffler round his neck.

The gate was open, and, darting through, he ran swiftly across the road in the direction of Vicarage Gardens. I realised that it was a hundred to one against my catching him, but by a frantic effort I managed to gain the pavement at the very moment when he was rounding the corner. The distance was not more than fifteen yards, and, steadying myself for the fraction of a second, I flung the candlestick straight at his retreating figure. It missed his head by the

merest shade, and, cannoning against the opposite side, crashed down into the gutter.

Breathless, and not a little disappointed, I pulled up under the lamp-post outside my railings. I am no stickler for conventions, but even on a hot June night the prospect of chasing about Kensington in pyjamas and bare feet failed to appeal to me. I felt that, having lost my chance, the most dignified thing would be to retire gracefully from the contest, and I was on the point of stepping forward to recover my lost property, when the silence was suddenly broken by the tramp of heavy boots. The next moment a man appeared, coming quickly towards me up the hill.

I had no craving for a chat with a stranger at that hour, but clad as I was, and in the full light of the lamp, any attempt at escape was out of the question. Some sort of explanation was obviously necessary, so, with as good a grace as I could manage, I stood still awaiting his arrival.

When he got a little nearer I saw that he was a big, middle-aged man with a grizzled moustache, dressed in a blue suit and wearing a bowler hat. Somehow or other his appearance seemed vaguely familiar.

He was making straight for me, but just before he reached the corner the candlestick apparently caught his eye. Stepping aside, he picked it up out of the gutter, and, having examined it for a moment, came across to where I was standing.

"I suppose I'm right in assuming that this belongs to you, sir?" he remarked civilly.

"Yes," I said, "thanks very much. I threw it at a burglar, and missed him."

There was a brief pause.

"Oh," he said slowly, "a burglar, eh? So that was the trouble, was it?" He tilted back his hat and scratched his forehead. "Well, I don't know if I can be of any assistance, but, in a manner of speaking, burglars happen to be more or less in my line."

I looked at him with interest. "I seem to recognise your face," I said, "but I'm blessed if I can remember where I've met you."

He handed me the candlestick, and, producing a small leather case from his inside pocket, carefully extracted a visiting-card.

"I'm a neighbour of yours, Mr. Cameron. I live round the next corner with a sister of mine, and we've passed each other frequently in the course of the last year. I generally take the trouble to find out people's names when I know them by sight. A kind of professional instinct with me, I suppose."

He offered me the card, and, holding it up to the light of the street lamp, I managed to make out its contents.

MR. GEORGE JENNIFER,
Late Detective-Inspector, C.I.D.

26 Campden Hill Terrace.
Tel. Ken. 2548.

"This seems to be what they call 'the finger of Providence,' Mr. Jennifer," I said. "Won't you come inside and have a drink? I find it a little cool chatting on the pavement."

"That's very kind of you, sir," replied my new acquaintance affably. "I don't want to thrust my company on you, but, as I said before, if there's anything I can do you're welcome to my advice."

"We shall have to climb in through the sitting-room," I explained. "The front door is locked, and there's no one to answer the bell except my housekeeper, Mrs. Higgins. If she's awake she's probably having a fit."

I led the way back across the garden, and the next minute we were standing on the grass outside the study. The window was swinging wide on its hinges, and I noticed that one of the panes was broken.

"I'll go first," I said; "then I can give you a hand"; and, tossing the candlestick over the sill, I caught hold of the woodwork and hoisted myself up. With surprising agility for a man of his bulk, Mr. Jennifer scrambled in after me.

"A very neat little bit of work," I observed approvingly. "Now, if you'll stop here for a moment I'll see if I can find the switch."

I advanced with caution in the direction of the doorway, and, turning on the light, threw a hasty glance round the room. As far as I could observe, everything was exactly as I had left it.

"Come along in and help yourself to a whisky," I said. "You won't mind if I run upstairs and shove on a coat?"

Mr. Jennifer, who had remained obediently at his post, stepped forward through the half-drawn curtains.

"Not in the least," he replied. "I shall be quite happy here." He looked about him with an inquiring eye. "I conclude from the broken window that this was the way by which our friend entered the house?"

I nodded. "Yes," I said, "and the way by which he left it too. I heard him break the glass, and came down from my bedroom to see what was the matter. Unfortunately, he'd locked the door. If he hadn't had the sense to do that I should probably have caught him."

"Locked the door, did he?" repeated the detective thoughtfully. "Well, that's rather an interesting and suggestive point—don't you agree with me, Mr. Cameron?"

"What do you mean?" I inquired.

"I think you had better go and put on your coat and some slippers before we start discussing the matter," he replied. "You'll find it's much easier to catch a cold than it is to catch a burglar." He took off his hat and placed it on the table. "And with your permission," he added, "I'll take the liberty, while you're away, of having another glance at that window."

"Do exactly what you like," I said. "I shan't be more than a couple of minutes."

I left him to his own devices, and, flicking on the light in the hall, ran quickly up the staircase. As I reached the landing above I caught sight of Mrs. Higgins standing at her bedroom doorway. She was arrayed in a red flannel dressing-gown, and her scanty hair was twisted up in curl-papers.

"Oh, Mr. Cameron!" she gasped. "Whatever's the matter? I made sure there were burglars in the house."

"Only one, Mrs. Higgins," I said, "and he's gone a long time ago. He broke into the study and I chased him out through the window."

She stared at me with wide-open eyes. "Well I never!" she exclaimed. "To think that such things can happen—and in Kensington, too."

"It's disgraceful," I agreed, "especially considering the rates I have to pay." I paused. "However, it's all over now," I added soothingly. "Nothing's been stolen, and I've managed to get hold of a police inspector who happens to live just round the corner."

"A police inspector!" she repeated. "He won't want to come up here, will he, sir?"

"No, I don't think so," I said. "He seems quite contented where he is at present. You pop back into bed and see if you can't go to sleep."

I turned into my own room, and, having slipped on a smoking-jacket and a pair of old pumps, hurried down again to the study.

I found Mr. Jennifer standing by the curtain examining a piece of broken glass, which he had apparently retrieved from off the floor.

"You look like one of the illustrations from Sherlock Holmes," I said chaffingly. "My dear Watson! The man's name is John Tomkins, and he lives in a back room in the Kennington Road."

He came towards me, a pleasant twinkle in his eyes.

"I'm afraid I haven't got quite as far as that yet," he admitted. "Still, it may interest you to hear that you've been throwing candlesticks at a really first-class cracksman."

"How do you know?" I inquired.

"Well," he answered, "the amateur burglar doesn't, as a rule, wear rubber gloves, and when he breaks windows he doesn't smear treacle on the pane to deaden the sound." He put down the fragment he had been holding on the tray, and, producing a handkerchief from his sleeve, wiped his fingers. "Besides," he added, "any man who can get into a house without being seen, right under the light of a street lamp, clearly knows something about his job."

I picked up the decanter. "Holmes," I said, "you are wonderful! Let me pour you out a tonic."

I handed him a well-lined tumbler, which, with a smile and a nod, he raised to his lips.

"Here's your good health, Mr. Cameron,"

he remarked, "and very pleased to make your acquaintance."

He tossed off the contents, and, after mopping his moustache appreciatively, stuffed back the handkerchief into his cuff.

"Of course, it's none of my business," he continued, "but, seeing the risks this chap was prepared to take, I can't help wondering what he was after."

"Haven't you any theory?" I asked mischievously.

"Nothing beyond an idea that whatever he was looking for was probably in this room."

"That's exactly where the poor lad made his bloomer," I said. "The particular object he wanted happens to be upstairs on my bed." I helped myself to a cigarette and pushed the box across the table. "He wasn't the ordinary sort of thief with a yearning for teaspoons," I explained. "Unless I'm altogether mistaken, he just dropped in to borrow a book."

There was a moment's silence.

"It must be an interesting book," observed the inspector blandly. "Perhaps that's the reason why you keep it in your bedroom."

I had already made up my mind that to a certain extent I would take Mr. Jennifer into my confidence. For a retired policeman he seemed to be singularly human and intelligent, and, apart from that, I had an instinctive feeling that he rather liked me personally. If my deductions were right, and I had really stumbled up against

some shady and underhand conspiracy, he might turn out to be an extremely useful ally. The one part of the affair which I was determined to keep to myself, at all events for the present, was the discovery of the cipher inscription. That was Peter's secret quite as much as mine, and without consulting him it would hardly be fair to give it away to anyone else. Besides, I wanted to have the satisfaction of being the first person to make out its meaning.

"You won't be offended if I ask you a question, Mr. Jennifer?" I inquired.

"I shouldn't think so," he replied. "It takes a good deal to offend me."

I pulled out his card, which I had tucked safely away in my coat pocket. "I see you describe yourself as late of the C.I.D.," I said. "Does that mean that you have no longer any official connection with the police?"

"None at all," he answered. "I was pensioned off last year. I still do a little in the way of private inquiry work, but that's only to amuse myself and to help keep the pot boiling." He lighted a cigarette, and, blowing out the match, surveyed me shrewdly from under his grizzled eyebrows. "Nothing you care to say will go any farther," he added. "It's not my business to run round reporting burglaries."

"Well, now we know where we are," I observed cheerfully. "The fact is, I've arranged to start off on a sailing trip to-morrow, and it would be a damned nuisance if I had to stop

here answering a lot of stupid questions. You see, there's no harm done except for a broken pane of glass, so what's the sense in messing up one's arrangements?" I strolled over to the fireplace. "At the same time," I continued, "there are one or two rather odd points about to-night's affair—so odd that I'm not at all sure something further isn't going to come of it." I paused. "If anything should," I added, "would you be prepared to take up the case?"

"I'll take it up with the greatest pleasure," he replied. "I like a job that's a bit out of the ordinary, and from the little I've seen and heard this business ought to suit me exactly."

"Good," I said; "then suppose you sit down and listen for a minute while I give you the actual facts? When you know what's really happened, I think you'll be more interested still."

He seated himself in one of the armchairs, and, without beating about the bush, I plunged straight ahead into the story of my adventures. I explained how I had purchased the Coryat at Wiltshire's a couple of days ago, and then went on to describe the unexpected appearance of Mr. Skinner, and the threats which that gentleman had indulged in when I refused to part with the book. Omitting all reference to Peter's visit, I wound up with a brief account of the way in which I had been disturbed in bed, and the spirited events that had led up to my appearance on the pavement.

Sitting there with his legs crossed, and puffing quietly at his cigarette, Mr. Jennifer listened to me in profound silence. I could see from his face that he was following every word I said with the closest attention, but, except for an occasional nod, he remained perfectly impassive until I had finished.

"It's asking a good deal to expect anyone to believe a yarn like that," I concluded. "All the same, what I've told you is absolutely true, and if you can throw any light on the matter I shall be vastly obliged to you. I am always open to good advice, especially from experts."

For a moment or two the inspector sat gazing at the floor, as though his attention had become suddenly absorbed in the pattern of the carpet.

Then, slowly raising his eyes, he favoured me with a long, reflective stare.

"Yes," he said at last, "it's a curious story—a very curious story indeed, Mr. Cameron. There are just one or two points I should like a little further information about—that is to say, if you've no objection."

"What are they?" I inquired encouragingly.

"This man you saw running out through the gate—are you quite sure it wasn't Skinner?"

"Positive," I replied, "unless he'd grown at least six inches in the interval. Besides, Skinner could never have run like that; he was a miserable-looking worm."

"And now with regard to the book. I can take it that you're right when you tell me it isn't worth more than twenty-five pounds?"

I nodded.

"Then why did you refuse fifty for it?"

"Just obstinacy," I said. "I'm not in any need of money, and I don't like being threatened by a dirty little rat like Skinner."

My companion smiled. "He sounds rather objectionable—not the sort of party you'd expect to be interested in an old volume of travels. By the way, have you any idea where this particular copy came from before it got into the bookseller's hands?"

"Not at present," I said. "Wiltshire was out the day I called, and the assistant who attended to me didn't seem to know much about it. From the way he spoke I gathered that the old man must have bought it quite recently from some customer in the country." I came forward and seated myself on the edge of the table. "I was thinking of going round there to-morrow before I start and making a few inquiries."

"It wouldn't be a bad idea," assented the inspector. "Of course you've examined the book thoroughly and satisfied yourself that there's nothing hidden in it—no stray papers, for instance?"

"Not a sign of one," I returned.

"And what do you propose to do with it when you go sailing?"

"Take it with me," I said. "I shall want something to read, and it will be a lot safer on *The Skylark* than it would be in this house."

Mr. Jennifer looked round in the direction of the curtain. "Yes," he observed drily, "from what I've seen of your window fastenings I'm inclined to agree with you." He uncrossed his legs, and, dusting some cigarette ash off his trousers, hoisted himself up out of his chair. "If you'd like my opinion," he continued, "I can let you have it in a very few words. Whatever's at the back of this business, you haven't heard the last of it yet—not by a long way."

"That's comforting," I said. "I suppose you can't give me any slight hint as to what it's all about?"

"There's only one thing I'm certain of," he replied; "somebody wants that book, and wants it so badly that they'll stick at nothing in order to get hold of it."

"If you mean Skinner——" I began.

"I don't," he interrupted curtly. "Unless I'm mistaken, Skinner is merely an agent."

"And how about the burglar?" I suggested. "Where does he come in?"

"I should say he was a skilled cracksman who had simply been engaged for this particular job. You can always get professional help if you're prepared to pay for it."

"I shouldn't wonder if you're right," I said

slowly, "and in that case I seem to be up against a pretty stiff proposition." I paused. "Even so," I added, "I'm not at all keen on calling in the police. I'd rather wait a bit and see whether anything further happens, especially if you really meant it when you said that you'd be quite ready to give me a hand."

"I'll do the best I can," was the answer. "I think you're running a considerable risk in leaving the matter as it is; still, that's a question which concerns you more than anyone else, and you must please yourself about it." He picked up his hat from the table. "I should strongly recommend you to stick to your plan of going round to Wiltshire's shop to-morrow and asking him a few questions with regard to the book's history."

"Right you are," I said, "I don't suppose he'll be able to tell me much, but it might give me something to work on. Anyway, I'll look you up when I get back and let you know the result."

"Yes, do," returned the inspector pleasantly "and if by any chance you want to get into touch with me before then, you'll find my telephone number on that card."

We walked out together into the hall, where I unlocked and opened the front door.

"Good-bye," I said. "I'm awfully glad to have met you, and I really don't know how to thank you for all your kindness and help."

"Not at all," he replied. "It's been a most

interesting evening, and I've enjoyed myself very much." He shook my hand. "Good-bye for the present, Mr. Cameron. Oh, there's just one other little point I'd like you to keep in your mind. When I undertake any work for a client, I expect to be admitted into his full confidence. It makes things so much easier for both parties."

"Of course it does," I agreed.

He put on his hat, and, turning away with a friendly nod, strode off briskly down the path.

I remained for a moment on the doorstep, staring after his retreating figure.

"Now, Mr. Jennifer," I said to myself, "I wonder what the devil you meant by that?"

CHAPTER III

"YOU'RE quite sure you don't mind being left alone, Mrs. Higgins?" I said. "If you're at all nervous, I could easily arrange for someone to come and sleep here while I'm away."

My housekeeper shook her head. "As long as I know that the study window is properly fastened, sir, I shan't be in the least worried."

"I'm going over to Barker's now," I said. "I'll see that they fix it for to-night, and I'll

tell them to call round on Monday and put in a couple of oak shutters—you know, the sort that fold up in the daytime. I ought to have had it done directly I came into the house."

"Yes, sir," agreed Mrs. Higgins. "Those kind of windows were safe enough when people were more or less honest and God-fearing—you can't afford 'em nowadays, not with all them Bolshevists about." She gathered together the belated remains of my breakfast, and then, picking up the tray, turned towards the door. "Shall I telephone for a taxi, sir?" she inquired. "There's a nasty drizzle outside, and you don't want to get wet through just as you're starting."

"Right you are," I said. "My things are all packed, so you can tell them to send it round at once."

I knocked out my pipe, and, getting up from my chair, strolled across to the window. For once in a way, Peter's prophecy of a change in the weather appeared to have been fairly accurate. The rain was coming down in a thin driving mist, while, up above the neighbouring chimneys, patches of black cloud pursued each other dismally across a sullen-looking sky.

It was not exactly an encouraging day from a sailing point of view, and I was still standing there staring resentfully through the streaming glass when a ring at the front door bell announced the arrival of my taxi.

As I came out into the hall I met Mrs. Higgins bringing down my bag.

"I don't know whether you meant to take that old book, sir?" she remarked. "It was lying on top of the other things, so I just left it there and fastened up the straps."

"Yes, I put it in on purpose," I replied. "If it's going to pour like this all the time, I shall want something in the way of a little light reading."

I struggled into my old sea-going mackintosh, and, relieving her of my belongings, walked down to the gate, where the driver was waiting for me.

Being a regular customer at Barker's, I had no difficulty in getting my requirements attended to. The manager of the department that dealt with such household emergencies listened to my story with the most profound sympathy. He promised me that, in spite of it being Saturday, he would see that my premises were safely secured against any fresh assault during the week-end, and he furthermore pledged his word that, within two or three days, I should be provided with a pair of patent shutters, which, to judge by his enthusiastic recommendation, had apparently broken the hearts of half the most experienced burglars in England.

Comforted by the knowledge that Mrs. Higgins would be able to slumber in security, I re-entered the taxi and instructed the man to

drive me to Wiltshire's shop, in the Charing Cross Road.

When I stepped in through the little dark doorway, so familiar to all London book-lovers, the first person I saw was Mr. Wiltshire himself. A dignified, white-bearded figure, in a black skull-cap, he was seated at his usual table, peering benevolently through a large magnifying-glass at the pages of some tattered folio.

"Well, well, well," he remarked, rising to his feet. "Why, you're the very gentleman I wanted to see. To tell the truth, I was on the point of writing you a letter."

"I've saved you that expense, anyhow," I replied. "You had better give me the penny-halfpenny instead; it will help to pay the taxi."

"Ah, you will have your joke, sir," he replied, beaming at me paternally. "Perhaps you wouldn't mind stepping into my private room for a moment; we are less likely to be interrupted there."

He led the way to a tiny book-lined apartment at the back of the shop, lit by a flickering gas-jet, and perfumed by the musty odour of old leather.

With a courteous bow he ushered me inside, and then, closing the door carefully behind us, came forward to where I was standing.

"I was about to write and apologise to you, Mr. Cameron, but I am very glad to have the

chance of doing it personally. May I say at once how extremely vexed and sorry I am that such a mistake should have occurred."

I looked at him in some perplexity.

"What's the trouble?" I inquired. "Have you been charging me too much on my last account?"

He made a deprecating movement with his hands. "My dear sir, I am referring to the stupid blunder of my assistant in giving your name and address to a stranger."

"Oh, that's all right," I said. "I've no doubt he meant well. He probably thought I should like the chance of selling the book at a profit."

My venerable acquaintance shook his head. "He was quite wrong to do it without obtaining your permission first. I have reprimanded him severely—very severely."

The idea of Mr. Wiltshire being severe with anyone was so comic that I could hardly stop myself from laughing.

"Well, I didn't come here to grumble," I said. "What I wanted to ask you was whether you can tell me where you dug up that copy of Coryat I bought. When I get hold of a first edition I rather like to know something about its history."

With a hospitable gesture Mr. Wiltshire pulled forward a chair.

"Why, of course, of course," he replied. "But won't you sit down and make yourself

comfortable? As a matter of fact, there's an interesting and remarkably sad story attached to those particular books that you were looking at." He seated himself at his desk, and, producing a large red silk handkerchief, proceeded to polish his spectacles. "They were the property of a very old customer of mine, and, if I may venture to say so, a very old friend too—the late Mr. Howard Franklyn, of Bredbridge Abbey."

"Franklyn!" I repeated. "There's a Henry Franklyn's name on the front page, with the date 1613. I suppose your friend must have been a direct descendant?"

Mr. Wiltshire nodded. "He was the last male representative of one of the most ancient families in East Anglia," he said, with some impressiveness. "The Franklyns have been at Bredbridge ever since the days of Henry the Eighth. The property was presented to them at the break-up of the monasteries."

"They seem to have been luckier than some of the others," I observed. "I've always heard that there's a sort of special curse on people who pinched the Church lands."

My companion readjusted his spectacles. "It's curious you should have mentioned that, sir. I can't say I believe in such superstitions myself, but I know that at poor Mr. Franklyn's death there was a lot of talk on the same subject. He was certainly very unfortunate, though in a sense, I suppose, it was chiefly his own fault."

"According to the best authorities," I said, "most of our misfortunes are."

"Please don't think that I'm speaking a word against him, sir," continued the old bookseller earnestly. "He was the kindest gentleman and one of the best scholars I ever met in my life, but, like so many other people, he would mix himself up in business affairs which he didn't understand. The result was nothing short of a disaster. About four years ago he had to sell Bredbridge Hall, and he and his daughter went to live at the Abbey. I don't know if you have ever seen the place, but it's little better than a ruin—a mere tumbledown shell, with only two or three habitable rooms."

"It seems a bit rough on the daughter," I said. "Was it she who sold you the books?"

"I had a letter from her about three weeks ago," he replied. "She wrote to ask me for my advice. There were some debts which had to be paid off—a matter of two or three hundred pounds—and the only way in which she could possibly raise the money was by disposing of a part of the library. Well, to cut a long story short, I went down there myself. I didn't want her to be cheated, as I knew she probably would be at an ordinary sale, so I just picked out twenty or thirty of the best books and gave her the top market price for each of them. I would willingly have paid a little more, but she insisted on my telling her what their actual

value was, and beyond that she refused to accept a penny."

"By Jove!" I exclaimed, "she sounds a bit of a sportsman."

"A very charming young lady," agreed Mr. Wiltshire warmly, "and, if I'm any judge, as brave and sensible as she's pretty. If only poor Mr. Franklyn had had half her character——" He broke off with a sigh.

"Who bought the family place?" I inquired. "Some grocer or pill-maker, I suppose?"

He shook his head. "It was a gentleman from the north of England—a Mr. Walter Ashton. I can't tell you much about him, but you may recollect seeing his name in the papers. He was the man who met with that terrible accident last year; he fell over a cliff in the dark, and was killed instantly."

I sat up with a jerk. "Killed!" I echoed. "What, down there at Bredbridge?"

"Almost within sight of his own house. With Mr. Franklyn's death occurring so soon after, it's no wonder some of the local people believe in the curse you were speaking about."

"It must be a quaint sort of curse," I objected, "if it only started working last year. Who lives at the Hall now?"

"A man named Medlicot—a cousin of Mr. Ashton's. I believe he came into the whole of the property. Miss Franklyn tells me that he's quite an agreeable neighbour—

spends most of his time collecting flowers and plants."

I looked at my watch, and discovered that it was nearly half-past eleven.

"Sorry to leave you, Mr. Wiltshire," I said, "but I've a taxi outside, and I shall be ruined if I stop here any longer." I got up from my chair. "Thanks for telling me about the book," I added. "As a matter of fact, I'm just off for a sailing trip, and I'm taking it with me to read on the boat. I shall value it a great deal more now I know what an interesting history it's got."

"It's a nice copy," he replied, "a very nice copy indeed, and well worth the money you paid for it."

Leading the way out of his sanctum, he accompanied me as far as the door of the shop, where we shook hands.

"Oh, by the way," I said, "I suppose you've no idea who that chap was—I mean the fellow who called here and got my address?"

"I'm afraid not, sir," he replied. "According to what they tell me, he was a complete stranger to us. He asked whether we could supply him with a first edition of Coryat, and my assistant, who, as I say, ought to have known better, informed him that you had bought the only copy we had the day before. I sincerely hope you were not troubled in the matter, but——"

"Oh it's of no consequence," I interrupted,

and, nodding him a reassuring farewell, I crossed the pavement and climbed back into my patiently waiting taxi.

. . . . . .

Half an hour later, with my bag and my hamper on the opposite side, I was being whirled eastward in the Southend train, through a dreary vista of wet roofs and smoking chimneys. A less inspiring start to a holiday it would have been difficult to imagine, but I was too occupied in pondering over what Mr. Wiltshire had told me to pay much attention to the landscape.

He had certainly provided me with something to think about. I knew Bredbridge; at least, I had seen it many a time from the deck of my boat—a desolate creek north of the Harwich estuary, with an old tower on one side of the entrance and a dangerous-looking bar on the other. From a note in the *Sailing Directory* it appeared to be the sort of place which a yachtsman who was fond of his life would be well advised to avoid. I had never heard of any boats using it as a harbour, though as likely as not some of the local barges were accustomed to find their way in and out.

Was it possible that this quiet and isolated spot was really the centre of some complicated villainy into which I had been accidentally drawn? If it were not so, why on earth should my purchase of an old book out of the Franklyn

library have resulted in such amazing developments? As the inspector had observed, somebody wanted that copy of Coryat, and wanted it precious badly. Unless the cipher were the attraction, and unless those mysterious letters related to a secret in connection with the Bredbridge estate, the whole business was utterly inexplicable.

The more I thought the idea over the more it seemed to fit in with Mr. Wiltshire's story.

A young girl, living down there by herself, was just the sort of victim who might be cheated or robbed with impunity. The legend of the curse, and the tragic death of the man who had purchased the property, helped to invest the affair with a strange and curiously ominous atmosphere. It gave me a feeling that I was up against something altogether unusual in the way of wickedness, and for the first time I half regretted that I had not taken Mr. Jennifer more fully into my confidence.

I was still meditating deeply over the problem when the train came to a halt at Leigh station. Pulling myself together, I hastily collected my luggage, and a minute afterwards, with my collar turned up and the rain beating in my face, I was trudging down the short approach which led to the waterside.

There was a number of yachts in the Ray, all dipping and rolling at their moorings in the most lively fashion. *The Skylark*, which was lying fairly close in, appeared to be quite as

restive as the others, and, with an uncomfortable conviction that we had a sleepless night ahead of us, I squelched my way forward through the wet sand.

As I approached, George, the old boatman who had charge of my dinghy, appeared at the door of his shed.

"Reckoned it was you, sir," he observed. "There ain't many of 'em fond enough o' trouble to come down 'ere on a day like this."

"It does look a bit rotten, doesn't it?" I agreed.

He stared out sombrely over the cheerless expanse of grey and broken water. "I don't know as I ever seen it much dirtier, and, wot's more, we ain't 'ad the worst of it yet—not by a long way."

"Thank you, George," I said. "I've invited a pal down for the week-end, and promised to take him for a nice long sail."

"Well, sooner 'im than me," was the encouraging answer. "Want to go aboard now, sir?"

I nodded, and, walking down to the jetty, seated myself on the hamper, while he splashed out to where my boat was lying and brought it alongside.

I had only a short distance to row, but, with the tide running strongly against me, I was not altogether sorry when I reached *The Skylark*. Pitching about as she was, I found it no easy job to unload the dinghy. By a little patience

and luck, however, I eventually succeeded in heaving my belongings over the rail, and then, working my way aft, I scrambled on deck myself.

As far as I could see, I was in sole possession of the harbour. There was no sign of life on any of the other yachts, while, except for an unhappy-looking tramp steamer creeping slowly out of the Medway, even the great sea route to London was absolutely deserted.

Never had my cabin appeared more comfortable than when I got down below out of the wind and wet. Being smack-built and rather broad in the beam, *The Skylark* boasted an unusual amount of accommodation—a fact which, in view of a certain comfort-loving streak in my own nature, had strongly attracted me to her from the first.

She had two long, well-padded bunks, with a swinging lamp at the end of each. There was just room enough to sit upright without bumping one's head, while in the centre, above the table, a coach-house roof afforded additional light and space.

The panelling, which was all of teak, was a legacy from her previous owner. It had aroused the jealousy of many of my fellow yachtsmen who were accustomed to cloak their envious feelings by declaring that such ostentatious snobbery was only suitable to an Atlantic liner.

Besides the customary cupboards and rack, I had provided myself with one or two extra luxuries in the shape of a clock, a looking-glass,

and a fold-up washstand. The forward bulkhead was devoted to my books—a small but prudently selected assortment, which included such trusty comrades as Boswell, Fitzgerald, McMullen, and E. F. Knight's *Falcon in the Baltic*.

Outside in the cockpit there were two spare berths, while at a pinch I could also find room for a fourth passenger in the fo'c'sle.

I changed from my shore clothes into a jersey and an old pair of trousers, and then set to work to unpack the hamper. I generally bring along a few dainties from Fortnum's when I come on board, and, on the present occasion, in honour of my visitor, I had been a bit more extravagant than usual. With affectionate care I disinterred a large chicken pie, a bowl of potato salad, a bottle of stuffed olives, half a dozen cutlets in aspic, and one of those nice fat brown jars of *pâté de fois gras*. As a special surprise for Peter there were also three bottles of sparkling Moselle —a pleasant and inexpensive fluid, to which I knew from experience that he was passionately attached.

Having stowed everything away, and tidied the cabin, I went up on deck again to inspect the weather. It was still blowing heavily from the north-east, but for the time being the rain had ceased falling.

With George's prediction in my memory, however, and with several jobs waiting to be done, including the rigging of a new peak

halyard, I decided that it would be verging on idiocy not to take advantage of my chance.

One can do a good deal of work in three hours if one really sticks to it, and by five o'clock I had not only completed the necessary repairs, but had satisfied myself that, as far as the gear and the fittings were concerned, we could look forward to the roughest passage with comparative serenity. I finished just in time, for a few moments later the rain began to come down again in a perfect torrent, and, devoutly thankful that I had made such good use of the interval, I retreated hastily to the cabin.

Having consumed a well-earned whisky, and got through a couple of pipes, I was lying on my back in a pleasantly lethargic state when I suddenly became conscious that somebody was hailing the yacht. Shoving my head up through the hatch, I saw Peter standing on the beach. To judge by his gestures, he appeared to be slightly impatient, and, with a guilty feeling that perhaps I ought to have heard him sooner, I slipped on my waterproof and tumbled into the dinghy.

"Sorry if I've kept you waiting, Peter," I began, as we grounded on the sand.

"That's all right, old man," he replied, "I don't mind being wet through as long as you've had a nice sleep." He deposited his bag on the seat, and, pushing off the boat, scrambled after it.

"Don't be bitter," I said. "When you see

what a lot of work I've done you'll be lost in admiration."

He grinned good-naturedly, and, taking off his bowler hat, tilted its contents over the side.

"What a swine of a day!" he remarked. "I suppose we shall have to stick around here until this infernal wind drops."

"Well, there's no particular hurry," I said. "We'll have something to eat first, anyhow, then we can see what it looks like. It wouldn't be much catch going out now; besides, before we do anything else you've got to listen to what happened to me last night."

"Last night!" he repeated. "You don't mean to say that you had any more mysterious visitors?"

"One or two," I replied. "You shall hear all about it when we've had some grub."

. . . . . .

With an air of vast contentment, Peter lay back on the bunk, and, lighting a cigarette, arranged himself luxuriously amongst the cushions.

"Why does everything taste nicer on a boat than anywhere else?" he inquired. "I've often had cold chicken pie before, but it's never made me feel as happy as this."

"Perhaps you didn't eat so much of it," I suggested.

He shook his head. "I always eat as much as I can," he replied drowsily.

"Now, don't go to sleep, Peter," I said.

"I've all sorts of exciting things to tell you, and you've jolly well got to sit up and take an intelligent interest in them."

"I can do that as I am," was his answer. "You just get on with it, and don't worry about me. As a matter of fact, my brain works better when I'm lying down."

"Well, I suppose I shall have to trust you," I said reluctantly, "only for heaven's sake try to keep awake. I seem to have jammed my foot into a regular hornets' nest, and I want your advice badly."

Beginning my story at the moment when we had parted on the previous evening, I gave him a full and graphic account of everything that had occurred since. I soon saw that there was no need to worry over the question as to whether he were listening or not. Before I had been speaking for more than a few minutes his slight tendency towards somnolence had completely vanished. He had roused himself up into a sitting position, and, with his half-smoked cigarette burning away between his fingers, he was leaning forward on one elbow staring at me in absorbed silence.

"I don't know how you feel about it," I finished, "but I wouldn't mind betting my last dollar that what these people are really after is that cipher inscription on the back of the title-page. I've been right through the book, and——"

"Of course it's the cipher," interrupted

Peter. "Didn't I tell you so directly I found it?" He paused for a moment, and then suddenly broke into a long, meditative chuckle. "What a bit of luck!" he observed. "Fancy running up against a thing like this, and having it entirely to ourselves! I'm so glad you didn't give it away to that infernal policeman."

"It's all very well having it to ourselves, I objected, "but the point is, what the devil are we going to do? I'm sure there's a dirty plot on to swindle this girl out of something that belongs to her, and, whoever the beauties are at the back of it, I don't propose to sit by and give them a free hand."

"Certainly not," agreed Peter promptly; "it would be altogether against the rules of chivalry, and besides, I love interfering in other people's affairs." He swung himself round and sat facing me across the table. "I've got an idea," he announced.

"Well, don't waste it," I said encouragingly.

"We've nowhere particular to go to, and I'm perfectly free till Monday afternoon. You know this place Bredbridge—at least, you know where it is. Why shouldn't we run up there in the boat and have a sniff round? I don't suppose we should discover anything, but it would be a damn sight more amusing than merely cruising about the coast."

I looked at him in open admiration.

"That's not an idea, Peter," I said slowly; "that's a brain-wave!"

CHAPTER IV

I HAD finished my washing, and was standing on deck towelling myself vigorously, when Peter, still clad in pyjamas, put his head up through the hatch.

"What do you make of it?" he inquired.

"Might be worse," I said. "It's not raining, and the wind's shifted round to the south. We'd better be getting under way at once."

He passed his hand ruefully over his chin. "Just as you please," he remarked. "I should have liked a shave first, but, after all, it doesn't really matter. I don't suppose there'll be a lot of people about on a morning like this."

There was indeed a noticeable dearth of other small craft as, twenty minutes later, with our second jib and a reef in our mainsail, we bucketed our way seawards down the Ray Channel.

Well acquainted as I am with the mouth of the Thames, there is to me a never-failing fascination about the last two or three miles of the river. Even the united efforts of Westcliff and Southend have been unable to destroy their magic, and sitting there, tiller in hand, I drew in long breaths of the fresh salt air, and stared contentedly about me at the familiar landmarks.

We were well out in the open, and nearly down to the Nore, when Peter, who had retired below to complete his toilet, reappeared on deck.

He settled himself down on the seat alongside the cabin-top.

"The old tub seems to be buzzing along," he observed. "At this rate we ought to be off Harwich by lunch-time."

"Somewhere about there," I agreed. "The wind's just right as it is, and we shall carry the ebb with us the whole way down Swin. The only snag will be getting on to Bredbridge against the flood."

"What sort of an entrance is it?" he asked. "Any trouble about running in?"

"Plenty," I replied. "There's a beast of a bar, which appears to shift its position every other tide. According to the sailing directions, it's a regular death-trap."

"Oh, we shall manage it all right," he observed optimistically. "I've great faith in you, James, and, besides, it's quite clear that we've been picked out for what my aunt used to call 'a special purpose.' Providence wouldn't go and spoil the fun by drowning us at the critical moment."

"We'll hope not, anyhow," I said. "I've set my heart on having a look at the place, though I'm hanged if I know what we're going to do when we get there."

"That's simple enough," was his reply. "You must scrape acquaintance with this ingenuous orphan and endeavour to gain her confidence. It oughtn't to be difficult for a well-set-up young fellow like you."

"The merest child's play," I agreed. "And how do I proceed then?"

"Tell her the whole story. Even if she can't explain it, she'll probably have some idea as to what it's all about."

"I think I'll leave most of the talking to you, Peter," I said. "You'll manage it a lot better than I shall."

He shook his head. "It's no good counting on me. I'll do what I can, but I've got to be back in town on Monday night at the latest. You'll have to carry this show through on your own, so the sooner you start in the better."

He ducked down abruptly, as a sudden steep sea burst in over our bows, sending a storm of spray along the deck and drenching us both from head to foot.

"Very bracing and exciting, all this," he added, "but personally I shouldn't mind if it was a shade calmer."

From the point of view of comfort it was impossible to deny that his sentiment was a sound one, for *The Skylark*, although, as I have said, a splendidly built vessel, was by no means a dry ship in rough weather. When one is sailing, however, comfort is one of those considerations which necessarily have to take a back seat. Unless we were through the Spitway before the wind dropped, I knew that it would be impossible to make Bredbridge against the tide, and, having no wish to waste time by putting into Harwich, I was not going to allow

a splash or two of salt water to interfere with our arrangements.

"We shall have to lump getting wet, Peter," I said. "You can't expect to play the knight errant without suffering a little inconvenience. Think how grateful the girl will be when we come to her rescue."

"You'll get the benefit of that," he retorted, turning up his coat-collar. "She'll be hanging round your neck while I'm struggling with double pneumonia."

"Well, wait till you've seen her," I suggested. "For all we know at present, you may have got the softer job of the two."

It must be a good thirty-five miles from the Nore Lightship to the Blacksand Buoy—a winding course of channels, cutting their way between the great sandbanks which stretch out to sea from the Essex coast. Cheerful enough in fine weather, with the barges and fishing-boats about, it lay before us to-day an empty waste of grey and tossing water. Here and there the thin smoke-line of a steamer was just visible on the horizon, while at long intervals, as though to complete the sombreness of the scene, came a dull, reverberating *boom* from one of the big guns at Shoeburyness.

With the wind and tide urging her forward, however, *The Skylark* slipped along merrily enough through the white-capped breakers. By half-past eleven we were abreast of the Maplin Lighthouse, its gaunt, spider-like structure

looking inexpressibly forlorn as it towered up amid the surrounding desolation. In this part of the Swin, known as Shoe Hole, the sea, even in a light breeze, is generally inclined to be obstreperous. On such a morning as the present one it can be guaranteed to upset the toughest constitution, and, good sailor as I am, I must admit that I had had quite as much as I could stand by the time we staggered through into the Spitway.

"You take her now, Peter," I said. "I've done my bit, and besides, I want to go and look up the chart. There's a short cut somewhere about here which leads right through to the Blacksand."

"It can't be too short for me," was his heartfelt reply, and, handing him over the tiller, I crawled forward and lowered myself stiffly down the cabin hatch.

Wet through, and with my eyes smarting from the perpetual spray, I unrolled the chart and spread it out on the table in front of me. I knew something about the course I intended to take, having sailed over it the previous summer, but, thanks to one or two unfortunate experiences in the past, I had a healthy distaste for that form of navigation which consists of trusting to one's memory. I therefore set to work to jot down a few precise notes with regard to the various depths and buoys which were likely to concern us, and I was just on the point of completing my labours when

Peter's face suddenly appeared at the top of the companion.

"Come up a minute, will you, Jim?" he said. "There's something here I'd like you to have a look at."

He vanished with the same abruptness, and, snatching up my glasses, which were lying beside me, I scrambled hastily on deck.

"There you are!" he said, pointing forward through the rigging. "Who says we're not a nation of sailors?"

Straight ahead of us, and only about half a mile distant, a tiny cutter, with a solitary figure on board, was rising and dipping in the swell and fall of the waves. She was certainly not more than a three-tonner, and, although obviously a good boat for her size, she seemed ridiculously small to be out in such weather.

"I wonder who the owner is?" I said. "Some sportsman from Burnham, I suppose."

"She looks like one of that bunch," replied Peter. "Lend us those glasses and I'll see if I can spot her name."

At the very moment he spoke the little vessel in front of us altered her course, veering round to starboard and heading for the north-east.

"You needn't bother," I said. "We shall catch her up soon. She's cutting through the Blacksand Channel exactly the same as we are."

There was a brief silence while Peter, who

had already possessed himself of my binoculars, focused them on our unknown pilot.

"Well I'm blessed!" he exclaimed. "Why, the chap's a mere kid—a boy of fourteen or fifteen, from the look of him."

"He can handle a boat, anyhow," I said. "Let's have——"

A sharp, splitting crack, which was audible even at that distance, seemed to freeze the words in my throat.

I heard a hoarse cry from Peter.

"Good Lord!" he shouted. "Her stick's gone!"

I sprang to my feet, gripping the backstay, and staring in a kind of fascinated helplessness at the stricken vessel. For a moment I saw her sway drunkenly, as the wind caught her and swung her over, then slowly—hideously slowly, so it seemed to me—the whole mast and rigging toppled down into the water.

The crash of its fall seemed to clear my senses, and with one swift jump I was back again at the tiller.

"Better leave it to me, Peter," I said. "I know the place."

"Right you are," he replied coolly. "You take her on, and I'll stand by for orders."

He crawled forward as far as the after-shrouds, and remained there staring through the glasses.

"She's done for," he announced grimly. "The boom's stove her side in, and she's filling like a bucket."

"How about the boy?" I demanded.

"Sound as a drum from the look of him. There he is, trying to clear the mess."

I caught sight of a small, bare-headed figure hacking desperately at the tangled wreckage; then, with a stifled oath, Peter suddenly leaped to his feet.

"By God, Jim!" he cried. "It's not a boy at all; it's a girl."

"A girl!" I echoed. "It can't be!"

"I tell you I can see her quite plainly. She's got on a man's oilskins, but it's a girl right enough, I'll take my oath."

He hurried back aft, and began throwing off the sheet of the dinghy.

"That's no good, Peter," I said. "The damn thing will sink long before you can get there."

"What are you going to do, then?"

"Sail up alongside," I answered, "and shout to her to jump. There's no other way of getting her off."

He glanced at the ugly line of broken surf towards which the doomed cutter was steadily drifting.

"If you'd like a bet, I'll lay you two to one in sixpences that we pile ourselves up."

"You're on," I said briefly. "Get forward, and if that girl's got the pluck to jump, for the love of Mike be ready to grab hold of her."

Steering just to windward of my mark, and almost blinded by the spray, I drove *The Skylark*

relentlessly on through the rapidly shoaling water. To my relief, I saw that the girl on the boat had evidently grasped our intentions, for, abandoning her hopeless efforts to clear the mast, she scrambled like a cat up the steeply sloping deck.

Nearer and nearer we came, till at last not more than a couple of lengths separated us from each other.

I caught a momentary glimpse of Peter, crouching tensely in the bows, then, with a prayer in my heart, I swung the tiller over, and, judging it to a nicety, we shot in close under the tossing stern.

"Now!" roared Peter encouragingly.

Letting go her hold the girl rose to her feet, and with a desperate spring flung herself towards him. They collapsed together on to the deck in a tumbled heap, and at the same instant we hit the ground with a jar that almost wrenched the tiller from my hands.

Flinging me from side to side, *The Skylark* plunged about like a bucking horse, while a torrent of water poured in over her stem and stern. Whether we were swamped or smashed to pieces seemed a mere matter of chance, for every time she fell she struck the sand with a thud that made her quiver to the mast-head. Bruised and half drowned as I was, however, I was still clinging to the tiller when suddenly a small panting figure in oilskins ducked out from under the boom.

"It's only a spit we're on," she gasped. "Keep her going and you'll drive over."

A ray of hope flashed through me at her words, and, rallying all my remaining strength, I braced my feet savagely against the rail. Another swirling deluge, a last bump that seemed to tear my arms from their sockets, and then with a final staggering lurch, we slid off into deep water.

"Everyone all right?"

It was Peter's voice calling, and Peter himself who lurched up unsteadily and dropped down alongside of us.

Spitting out a mouthful of salt water, and gulping the air deep into my lungs, I struggled back on to the counter. By some amazing luck *The Skylark* had evidently escaped any serious injury, and foot by foot we were already winning our way back into the open channel. It took me a few seconds to convince myself that we were really safe; then, still a little dazed at our good fortune, I looked round for the wrecked cutter.

I was just in time to witness her end.

Utterly waterlogged, her sinking hull struck the sand at the very point where we had grounded ourselves, and, splitting almost in two with the shock, she rolled over amid the surf.

A piteous cry broke from the girl, who was still crouching beside me.

"It's my fault," she sobbed. "I was a coward to leave her. If I'd stopped on board——"

"If you'd stopped on board," I said, "you'd have been drowned for a certainty. There wasn't a dog's chance of saving the boat, otherwise we'd have had a try."

My somewhat curt interruption seemed to produce its intended effect, for with an obvious effort she pulled herself together.

"Please forgive me," she faltered. "I know you did everything you could, and I haven't even thanked you."

"Oh, you mustn't talk like that," I said hurriedly. "I understand, of course. If it had been *The Skylark*, I should have felt exactly the same."

She glanced up at me gratefully, and I was just beginning to think what a curiously attractive and boyish-looking face she had when Peter suddenly interrupted us.

"I must apologise too, James, but I got my head such a devil of a crack on the deck that I was half silly for a minute. By the time I'd recovered, this young lady had vanished and it was all over."

With a little penitent exclamation the girl leaned towards him.

"I am so sorry," she exclaimed. "It seems perfectly horrible of me crawling away and leaving you like that after you had saved my life. I was trying to act for the best, though. You see, I knew exactly where we'd struck, and I thought I might be of some use."

"You were simply invaluable," I observed.

"If you hadn't come along and cheered me up, goodness knows what would have happened."

"I think you behaved with wonderful sense and pluck all through," put in Peter warmly "By the way, have you hurt yourself at all?"

She shook her head. "Only a few bruises. Luckily for me, I just had time to get out of the way before the mast fell."

There was a brief pause.

"Well, I don't know how you two feel about it," said Peter, "but it seems to me that this requires celebrating. I vote we open one of those bottles of sparkling Moselle."

"Quite a sound notion," I agreed, "but hadn't we better introduce ourselves first?" I turned to the girl. "I'm not curious," I added, "but I should awfully like to know who you are and where you come from."

She looked back at me smilingly.

"My name's Franklyn," she said, "Jean Franklyn; and I live at Bredbridge Abbey."

CHAPTER V

IF you've ever been punched in the solar plexus, you will have some idea of the effect which those simple words produced upon Peter and me. For a moment we both sat there gaping at her like a couple of idiots,

then by a colossal struggle I managed to recover my wits.

"I've heard of Bredbridge Abbey," I said. "Isn't it an old monastery, or something of the sort?"

She nodded. "It *was* a monastery, back in the fifteenth century. There's not much of it left now—only the part I'm living in."

"It sounds awfully jolly, living in a monastery," observed Peter, suddenly finding his voice. "When I was a small boy I always wanted to be a monk." He put his hand on my shoulder. "Go on, James. You're neglecting your job. Tell Miss Franklyn who we are."

"Certainly," I said. "My name's Cameron, and this is my friend, Peter West—Dr. Peter West. He's quite a distinguished person really, though he doesn't look it at present."

Her grey eyes travelled slowly from one to the other of us.

"I don't know what to say," she remarked a little helplessly. "You have both risked your lives to save me, and I——"

"I can tell you what you're going to do," interrupted Peter. "You're going to have a glass of wine and then turn in comfortably on one of the bunks."

She shook her head. "No, no," she said protestingly. "There's nothing the matter with me. I would much rather stay on deck."

"You've got to have a drink, anyhow,"

replied Peter. "We'll discuss the other point when I come back."

He lowered himself down the companion, and, tugging out a handkerchief from somewhere under her oilskin, Miss Jean Franklyn proceeded to mop the back of her close-cropped curly hair.

"I can't remember what happened to my hat," she said. "I suppose it fell off and went overboard."

"I shouldn't be surprised," I said. "What made you come out by yourself on a day like this?"

She glanced critically at the sullen-looking rollers as they plunged past us and tumbled away astern.

"Oh, it's not so bad as all that," she replied. "I should have been quite safe if the mast hadn't gone."

Before I could answer, Peter, laden with a bottle and some glasses, reappeared through the hatch.

"I'm not sure we haven't sprung a leak," he announced cheerfully. "Anyhow, we're swimming in water down below. After I've had a little refreshment, I'll get to work on the pump."

"I expect it's only what we've shipped," I said. "I was just pointing out to Miss Franklyn that it's not exactly the sort of weather for single-handed cruising."

"Perhaps I oughtn't to have risked it," she admitted a trifle reluctantly. "You see, the

fact is, I went round to Burnham on Thursday meaning to come back the next morning. It was too rough to sail yesterday, and I didn't like to stay away any longer because Mary, my old servant, isn't very well, and she's all alone at the Abbey."

"We can land you at Bredbridge perfectly well," I said. "Curiously enough, it's the very place we were thinking of making for. The only point we were doubtful about was whether we could find our way in."

She hesitated. "Is that really true, or are you merely saying it because you know I want to go there?"

"If you don't believe me, ask Peter," I replied. "No doctor ever tells a lie."

"It's quite correct," said Peter, drawing out the cork with a pop. "Jim and I have a fancy for exploring, and we've never been up your river. According to what he tells me, most of the people who try get drowned in the attempt."

"It's easy enough when you know the channel," she answered. "I can pilot you in, if you don't mind trusting your boat to me."

"You must ask the skipper," said Peter. "As far as I'm concerned, I'd trust you with the *Mauretania*." He filled a glass and handed it across. "Drink that up like a good girl. It will steady your nerves and do you no end of good."

"Suppose we make a bargain," I suggested.

"If you'll do what Peter advises—go and lie down and have a good rest—I'll let you know as soon as we're in sight of the harbour. Then you shall come up and show us the course."

"Very well," she said submissively. "If it wasn't for you two I shouldn't be here at all, so the least I can do is to obey orders."

She finished her wine, and, having leaned over the rail and dutifully rinsed the glass, rose to her feet.

"I'll come down with you and have a look round," I said. "If we're really leaking badly we may have to cut in to Harwich." I resigned the tiller to Peter, who was squatting on the deck just in front of me. "Keep her going as she is," I added, "north-east by north. We're right out in the middle now, and it's a straight run to the next buoy."

Leading the way below, I found the cabin in a state of pitiable confusion. Both racks had been emptied of their contents, cushions were lying about all over the place, while every time the ship rolled, a puddle of dirty-looking water slopped backwards and forwards across the floor-boards.

"I'm sorry we're a little untidy," I said. "If you'll sit down on one of the bunks I'll soon get this mess cleared up."

"Can't I help?" she suggested.

"Certainly not," I replied. "You're a first-class passenger, and it's dead against the company's rules."

I salvaged the cushions, which I placed on the table, and then, slipping back into the well returned with a bucket and an old piece of sponge.

"I don't think there's a leak," I said. "I believe all this came in through the skylight and down the hatch."

"You're probably right," returned my companion placidly. "We shan't be long finding out, anyhow."

She had already removed her wet oilskins, and, sitting there in a pair of flannel trousers and a close-fitting jersey, she seemed more like a slim, good-looking boy than ever.

I set to work at swabbing up the water, and by the time I had completed my job the cabin looked a shade more presentable.

"You can't lie on those; they're absolutely soaking," I said, lifting up one of the cushions. "Just wait a moment and I'll fix you up with something dry."

She started to protest, but, without giving her time to finish, I ducked through the dividing doorway, and extracted the pillow from the hammock in the fo'c'sle.

"Here you are," I said, placing it on the head of the bunk. "Now lie down and have a nice quiet nap. If you'd like a cigarette first, you'll find one in that locker behind you."

She looked up at me, a faint, half-mischievous smile hovering round the corners of her lips.

"I think you must be accustomed to rescuing

girls. You seem to have all your arrangements so beautifully organised."

I shook my head. "I haven't really had much practice," I said. "It's a new hobby which I'm just taking up."

I paused to collect my bucket and sponge, and then, nodding her an encouraging farewell, went out and closed the door behind me.

When I arrived on deck, Peter still appeared to be a trifle dazed.

"Have I gone mad," he demanded, "or was that girl telling us the truth?"

I emptied the bucket over the rail, and seated myself on the counter alongside of him.

"You needn't be alarmed, Peter," I said. "There's no deception about Miss Jean Franklyn. I've just left her tucked up on your bunk."

He remained for a moment eyeing me in blank silence.

"Now perhaps you'll believe what I told you," I continued. "I said that Providence had specially picked us out for the job. Why, it was a million to one against our running across her in this extraordinary way. Miracles like that don't happen by chance."

"They've no right to happen at all," he objected. "To a properly trained scientific mind this sort of thing is positively indecent."

"It has its advantages, all the same," I remarked. "Instead of wasting time trying to get to know her, we can start in on the business straight away."

He glanced at me questioningly. "You haven't said anything to her yet, I suppose?"

"Great Scot, no," I replied. "Why, the poor child has only just staggered out of the jaws of death. We must give her time to recover before we spring any further shocks on her."

"I'm the one who's in need of sympathy," he observed, rubbing his head ruefully. "I've got a bump here the size of a pigeon's egg." He paused. "What did you do with that book of yours? She's sure to spot it if you left it lying about in the cabin."

"I didn't," I said. "It's locked away in my bag, and it will be quite safe there. Nicely brought up girls never go round inspecting other people's luggage."

He sat ruminating thoughtfully for a little while, and then with a sudden chuckle leant forward and poured himself out another glass of wine.

"Well, here's luck, James," he said. "The Lord knows what's going to come of all this, but we've certainly kicked off in a fairly promising style. From the little I've seen of Miss Jean Thingumybob I'm more sorry than ever that I've got to get back to Town. There's something about the cut of her jib that rather takes my fancy."

"This is no time for romance," I said coldly. "If you're feeling sentimental, you'd better take a spell at the pump. Judging by the way

we're sailing, I should think we had half the North Sea on board."

As yacht pumps go, *The Skylark's* is an exceptionally powerful one, and under Peter's vigorous ministrations a stream of water was soon coursing through the scuppers. By the time it had ceased I had begun to feel a trifle less confident with regard to the soundness of our hull, but since the leak (if it existed) could clearly be kept under, I saw no reason why we should abandon our intention of making straight for Bredbridge. From where we were it was not more than a fifteen-mile run, and, once there, I could easily 'phone through to Harwich for some ship's carpenter to come over and help me patch up the damage.

The weather by now was showing faint signs of improvement, and before we reached the end of the channel a welcome break or two had already appeared in the leaden sky above us. It was still blowing furiously, but, with an occasional gleam of sunshine to cheer us on our way, our damped and somewhat chastened spirits began rapidly to revive. Running almost dead before the wind, we made a rapid passage across the broad stream of the Harwich estuary, and by two o'clock we were heading in against the flood to where a sudden rise in the dim, blue outline of the Suffolk coast marked the entrance to the Bredbridge river.

From what I could see of the place as we drew nearer, the uncomplimentary criticisms

which had been lavished upon it appeared to be amply justified. The north shore consisted of rough, desolate saltings, from which a curving line of sand and spray stretched out half way across the mouth. On the opposite bank the ground rose sharply into a steep headland, crowned with a solitary clump of weather-beaten fir-trees. At the foot of this, and jutting forward to meet the bar, ran a short, broken causeway of rough cement, on the extreme end of which stood an old, solidly built tower about twenty or thirty feet in height. Except for a few gulls, screaming and wheeling round the cliff, the whole neighbourhood seemed to be entirely deserted.

"Nice, quiet, picturesque spot," observed Peter gravely, "but somehow or other I don't think it will ever make a really popular yachting centre." He studied it for a moment through the glasses. "What do you propose doing?" he inquired.

"It's not my business," I said. "I'm going to call up the pilot and hand in my resignation."

"A very sound idea too," he remarked, moving towards the cabin-top. "I'll give a knock on the skylight just to let her know that she's wanted."

He rapped loudly with his knuckles, and after a comparatively brief interval a curly head appeared suddenly through the half-open hatch. Its owner looked round with an air of slight bewilderment.

"I believe I must have been asleep after all," she exclaimed. "I had no idea that we were anywhere near Bredbridge."

"That's our only excuse for disturbing you," I explained. "We were beginning to feel the need of a little expert advice."

She climbed quickly out, and, coming aft, seated herself beside me.

"I'll take her in if you like," she said. "But perhaps you would rather do it yourself?"

"I'd much sooner trust to you," I replied. "I've run aground once already, and that's quite enough to satisfy any ordinary ambition."

I surrendered the tiller into her charge, and shifted along the counter so as to make more room.

"How much do you draw?" she inquired. "About four foot six?"

I nodded.

"Nothing to worry about, then," she observed contentedly. "I don't suppose we shall have a great deal to spare, but if *The Flying Cloud* can get in at low water there's bound to be room for us."

"*The Flying Cloud?*" I repeated. "You don't mean to say you've got two yachts?"

"No such luck," was the answer. "She belongs to my neighbour, Mr. Medlicot. You'll see her lying off the Hall when we get inside."

As to how we were going to accomplish that feat I was still completely in the dark, but there was a quiet efficiency about our pilot's

manner which inspired me with considerable confidence.

Keeping dead on our previous course, we drew in closer and closer to the shore, until, judging by the shortness and steepness of the waves, we appeared to be driving straight for disaster. I still clung to my belief, however, that there must be some method in our apparent madness, and, at the very moment when a crash seemed imminent, the mystery suddenly revealed itself. A narrow fairway, not more than thirty yards across, opened out ahead of us on our starboard bow. It was evidently a short channel, cutting its way in between the tower and the bar, and, before I had even had time to utter a sigh of relief, the helm went over and we swung round towards the entrance.

Caught in the grip of the in-running tide, *The Skylark* charged forward at an exhilarating pace. I had a vivid sensation of leaping buoyantly down a sort of sea corridor, with white-capped breakers smashing and hammering on either side of us; then, as if by some abrupt magic, the turmoil ceased, and we found ourselves gliding on an even keel up the friendly waters of a broad and sheltered reach.

CHAPTER VI

IT was Peter who was the first to break the silence.

"I don't want to give a lot of trouble," he remarked, "but if we've any more experiences like that to go through, I think I'd rather get out and walk."

Miss Jean Franklyn, who was sitting bolt upright, with one bare, sun-browned arm resting on the tiller, glanced at him doubtfully.

"I hope you didn't really mind," she said. "It's quite safe and easy to get in when you know the channel, but I suppose it does seem a little awkward if you haven't been here before."

"You must never take Peter seriously," I explained. "When he isn't working he spends all his spare time trying to be funny." I stared across the water at the bold sweep of cliff, with its black firs standing out against the sky. "I call it a perfectly topping place," I added. "If I'd known it was half as attractive as this I should have paid you a visit long ago."

She smiled contentedly. "I'm so glad you like it. I suppose some people would think it quiet and dull, but, you see, my family has been here for hundreds of years, so of course I love every inch of it. I should be miserable if I had to live anywhere else."

"Is that the Abbey over there amongst those trees?" inquired Peter.

He pointed away down the next bend, to where a cluster of gables and chimneys were just coming into view on the farther side of the hill.

"No," she said, a little wistfully. "That's Bredbridge Hall, where I was born. The Abbey is a couple of miles from here, on the other side of the river."

Hemmed in by thickly growing woods, with a garden that sloped down to the water's edge, a pleasant, old-fashioned, ivy-covered house gradually revealed itself. If one might judge by appearances, it was evidently the residence of a yachtsman, for out in the river, some thirty yards from the shore, a smart, recently painted yacht was riding at her moorings.

"There's *The Flying Cloud*—the boat I was telling you about," continued our pilot.

"She looks as if she could move a bit," said Peter, inspecting her critically. "You had better go and call on the owner, Jim, and challenge him to a sailing match. It will give you something to do, and keep you out of mischief."

I made no answer, for while he was speaking my attention had been arrested by an extraordinary object which had suddenly appeared upon the yacht's deck. It was a figure of a hunchback—an enormously broad, short-legged, slouching creature, with a shock of flaming red hair which was plainly visible even at that distance. Catching sight of us as he came up

from below, he paused in apparent surprise, then, with a queer sideways movement, he shambled forward like a great ape and stood leaning against one of the stays watching our approach.

"You seem to have one rather curious neighbour," I said, turning to the girl beside me. "He looks as if he'd stepped out of a novel by Victor Hugo."

"Oh, that's only poor Ben," was her reply. "You'd soon get accustomed to him if you lived here. He's the son of Mr. Medlicot's skipper."

"What's the matter with him?" I asked. "Has he always been like that?"

She nodded. "He s dumb and half silly, but he's quite a good hand in a boat. He and his father run *The Flying Cloud* entirely."

As the intervening distance narrowed and I was able to obtain a clearer view, I saw that the face of this oddly shaped being was fully in keeping with the rest of his appearance. His forehead was so low that the eyebrows and the hair above seemed practically to meet. His nose, which had evidently been broken, was as flat as a negro's, while a monstrously underhung lower jaw added the last touch of grotesque repulsiveness.

"Well, Medlicot can't be very superstitious," I remarked. "There aren't many owners who'd employ a hand like that."

"I expect he puts up with him for the skipper's

sake," she answered. "It's just the sort of thing Mr. Medlicot would do. He's an extraordinarily kind man." She paused. "All the same," she continued, "Ben's perfectly harmless. He and I are old friends."

She leaned forward and waved her hand—a greeting to which the uncouth figure in the shrouds returned a clumsy and somewhat belated acknowledgment.

"No doubt he's a bit puzzled," she said, smiling. "He saw me go out in *The Penguin*, and he's wondering what's happened to her. My little adventure will provide a lot of local excitement."

"I think I must stop and see it through," I said. "Peter is deserting the ship on Monday, but, if you're not too busy, perhaps you'll take pity on me. Now I've actually got here, I should like to have a ramble round and inspect the neighbourhood."

"Oh, yes, do stay for a day or two," she said eagerly. "It will be great fun to have somebody to talk to. Mr. Medlicot is about the only person I ever see, and he's been away nearly all the spring."

"What about an anchorage?" I asked. "Can we tie up anywhere near the Abbey?"

"Almost exactly opposite," she answered. "There's a hard on this side, with a path across the saltings to the main road. You can land comfortably there whenever you want to."

"I do resent being one of the world's workers," put in Peter with some bitterness. "Why should I have to go back to London when I want to loaf about and watch the sunset, and drink beer at village inns?"

"It does seem a shame," agreed our companion sympathetically. "Couldn't you come down again later in the week, and join Mr. Cameron here?"

"I intend to make a fierce effort," he replied, "but——" He broke off as a further stretch of water opened out in front of us, disclosing a gradually narrowing fairway, on either side of which the thrift covered the marshes with a carpet of shot satin. "By Jove, that's pretty!" he exclaimed. "I'm not surprised that the old monks settled down at Bredbridge. They always staked out the best places for themselves, both in the next world and this."

"You can see the Abbey from here," announced its owner; "at least, you can see where it is." She pointed to another wooded slope in the distance, which stood out like a dark green island against the surrounding saltings. "The trees have grown up so high," she added, "that we're almost completely shut in now."

"We can't allow you to go rushing ashore the moment we arrive," I said. "You've got to stop and have tea with us."

She hesitated. "I don't think I ought to,

really. You see, I promised to be back yesterday, and poor old Mary must be worrying herself to death about me. I should like to let her know I'm safe as soon as I possibly can."

"Well, it's very distressing," observed Peter sadly, "but I suppose we must occasionally think of others."

"I want you both to come and lunch with me at the Abbey to-morrow," she went on; "that's to say, if you've no objection to having rather a scratch sort of meal."

"We love scratch meals," I said, "but are you quite sure we shan't be a nuisance? If Mary happens to be still on the sick list——"

"Oh, that won't matter," she interrupted. "I can cook the potatoes and make the coffee——"

"And if there's any washing up to be done," remarked Peter, "I may say without boasting that I'm thoroughly experienced and reliable. It's the one job on board which Jim leaves entirely to me."

"That settles it, then," she said, laughing. "I'll expect you at one o'clock, and please don't worry about making yourselves too tidy. It will only be just ourselves—unless Mr. Medlicot happens to look round."

Still keeping well in to the left-hand bank, we forged along steadily up our diminished waterway, which was now scarcely broader than one of the upper reaches of the Thames. I was beginning to wonder how much farther

we could go when I suddenly made out a spot about a hundred yards ahead which looked like a possible landing-place, and almost at the same moment our pilot commenced to haul in the main-sheet.

"I can manage it, thanks," she said cheerfully, as I leaned over to help her. "Perhaps you wouldn't mind getting down the sail and standing by for the anchor. I shan't come round; there's so little room."

Assisted by Peter, I carried out her instructions, and under the friendly influences of the tide and our own jib we glided forward to our appointed haven.

"Let her go!" came the order.

The anchor went over with a grinding crash of chain, and, snubbing up to it jauntily, *The Skylark* swung out into the river and bowed a polite acknowledgment to her new and attractive quarters.

"Speaking as an unprejudiced stranger," observed Peter, who was leaning over the boom, "I should like to say that my first impressions are entirely favourable." He turned towards the stern. "The skipper being otherwise engaged," he continued, "I beg to move a formal vote of thanks to Miss Franklyn."

Rising lightly to her feet, the object of his address strolled forward down the deck.

"It's not a bad place, is it?" she said. "There's plenty of water to keep you afloat, and if you want tobacco or stamps or—or

anything of that sort, it's only about ten minutes' walk to 'The Green Man.'"

"'The Green Man,'" echoed Peter. "That sounds deliciously like an inn."

"It *is* an inn," she said, "and a very nice inn too. You tell Mr. Bassett, the landlord, that you're friends of mine, and if there's any way in which he can be useful I'm quite sure he'll do everything he possibly can."

"Did you catch that, James?" demanded Peter. "A rustic tavern just outside our back door, with a subservient host waiting to uncork his best!"

I dumped down the jib, which I had dragged inboard, and came over to where they were standing.

"Our first job, Peter," I said sternly, "is to put Miss Franklyn ashore. I'll leave you to tidy up while I bale out the dinghy."

Armed with an old tin pannikin, I scrambled down into the half water-logged boat, which, in spite of the terrific buffeting we had been through, was still bobbing about bravely alongside of us. She had evidently been looked after by the same watchful Providence which had preserved *The Skylark*, and I was ladling away with silent gratitude when my passenger, who had gone below to recover her oilskins, reappeared on the deck above me.

"Don't worry about the rest of it," she said casually. "We shall be all right as long as we can get to the bank."

She dropped over into the stern-sheets and, leaving the rest of my baling operations to a more convenient season, I unhitched the sculls, which I had taken the precaution to secure before we set out from Leigh.

"Do you mind if I ask you a question about yourself, Mr. Cameron?" she inquired, as we pulled away from the side.

"Of course not," I replied. "It's the one subject on which I'm always prepared to talk."

"You told me that your friend was a doctor, but I haven't discovered yet what your own profession is."

"I belong to the idle rich," I said. "I used to be a clerk in the Home Office, but my uncle was kind enough to leave me a thousand a year, and since then I've lived on the workers."

She inspected me thoughtfully, her head a little on one side.

"You don't look like the sort of man who does nothing."

"Well, I have a hobby," I admitted. "I'm by way of being rather interested in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century literature. It's a harmless weakness as long as one keeps it to oneself."

"Oh, but what a pity my father isn't alive!" she exclaimed. "He would have so enjoyed meeting you. Poor daddy—he thought of nothing but his books, and there was no one

here he could talk to about them except me." She paused. "I've still got a whole roomful of them at the Abbey," she added. "If there are any you would like to borrow you must let me know."

Under different circumstances it would have been a splendid opening to embark upon my story, but, with scarcely forty yards to row, the thing was out of the question.

"Bredbridge seems to be full of pleasant surprises," I remarked. "What with an inn one side of the river and a library the other, I can see myself lingering on here as a permanent public nuisance."

"You'll have to settle it with Mr. Medlicot," she said, smiling. "He's the only other person you can possibly interfere with, and from what I know of him I am sure that the longer you stay the better he'll be pleased."

"Where would you like to be landed?" I asked, glancing round over my shoulder.

"In front of the white gate where that boat's lying," she answered. "I can get ashore anywhere about there."

I pulled in towards the spot in question, grounding on the mud some three or four yards from the bank.

"Don't move," she exclaimed, jumping to her feet.

I tried to protest, but she was over the side and splashing cheerfully through the slime before I even had time to ship my oars.

"I'm sorry you were in such a hurry," I said, when she was safely ashore. "I was just going to do the knight errant business and pick you up in my arms."

She stood on the grass, looking down at me with her laughing grey eyes.

"Perhaps it's as well you didn't. I'm a lot heavier than I look, and you'd probably have dropped me."

"It's an interesting point," I admitted. "We might try it to-morrow."

"Or you might experiment on Dr. West," she suggested mischievously. "That would be a better test still."

She stepped back and opened the gate.

"I shall expect you at one o'clock," she added, "and I do hope there'll be enough to eat. If you don't want to get your feet wet you had better come round by the bridge. You'll find the entrance to the Abbey just up the road."

She paused for a moment, and then with a friendly wave she lifted the latch and disappeared amongst the trees.

. . . . . .

Peter looked at his watch.

"It's twenty minutes past eight," he observed. "From what I know of rural customs, 'The Green Man' should now be at its best and brightest."

We had finished supper, and, with that blissful sense of well-earned leisure which follows a stiff day's sailing, we were reclining on our respective bunks, surrounded by a pleasant haze of tobacco smoke.

"Why bother about going ashore?" I objected. "We're very comfortable here."

"Comfortable!" he repeated. "What's that got to do with it? You can't solve mysteries by lying on your back in a state of over-fed torpor. If we mean to get to the bottom of this business we must be up and doing."

I rolled over and looked at him sceptically. "Sounds all right, Peter," I said, "but I'm afraid you're only animated by a natural low taste for sitting in pubs."

"Nothing of the sort," he declared. "Until we've something further to go upon, all this jawing and speculating is a mere waste of time. It's the people around here—people like Medlicot and that ugly hunchback of his—that we want to know something about, and there's no place for gossip like a village inn."

"Come along, then," I said, hoisting myself up. "In the sacred cause of Jean's welfare I'm ready to face any amount of bad beer."

I led the way on deck, where the setting sun, just visible above the trees, lit up the placid surface of the river and dyed the marshes with splashes of gold and crimson. The wind had fallen completely, and, except for the mournful

call of a curlew, the whole world seemed to be lapped in profound silence.

We rowed to the shore, and, hauling our dinghy up the beach, set off along a narrow path which ran inland across the saltings. About a hundred yards from the river it joined the main road, where a weather-beaten stone announced the fact that it was five and a half miles to Eastport.

Turning to the right, we soon came in sight of "The Green Man"—an ancient two-storey inn with a thatched roof and diamond-paned windows. It stood by itself, with its back to the water, and just beyond it the road crossed the river by means of an old stone bridge.

"Looks all right from the outside," remarked Peter approvingly. "I wonder if that boat belongs to the landlord?"

He pointed to a small motor-launch which was lying close in alongside the bank.

"I expect so," I said. "He probably uses it for rescuing customers who come out by the wrong door."

Walking up to the creeper-covered porch, where an old farm labourer, who was sitting on a bench, nodded us a genial greeting, we entered a low-ceilinged passage with a bar opening off it on the left-hand side.

It was the sort of bar which would have pleased Dickens—a simple, snug, friendly place, with a stone floor, wooden settles, and two or

three fine copper jugs hanging from a beam in the centre.

Its only other occupant was a stout, elderly man in shirt-sleeves, who was standing behind the counter, immersed in the engrossing occupation of cutting his nails. As we appeared in the doorway he looked up at us over his spectacles.

"Good evening, gentlemen," he observed. "Good evening to you both."

"Good evening to you," I said. "Are you Mr. Bassett?"

"That's me," he replied, as I came forward. "Sam Bassett—at your service."

He laid down his penknife, and, thrusting his hands into his trouser pockets, gazed inquiringly from one to the other of us.

"My name's Cameron," I said, "and this is a friend of mine—Dr. West. We've been told to introduce ourselves to you by Miss Franklyn."

Mr. Bassett's somewhat stolid features underwent a swift and remarkable change.

"Gawd bless my soul!" he exclaimed. "Why, you must be the two parties that picked 'er up on the Blacksand!" He withdrew his right hand from his pocket and thrust it out across the bar. "Put it there, sir," he commanded, "put it there. I couldn't be more pleased to meet you, not if you were the King of England."

He exchanged grips with both of us, pumping

our arms up and down as though to prove the sincerity of his statement.

"Thank you for the compliment," I said. "But how on earth do you come to know anything about it?"

"Why, it were Miss Jean 'erself as told me," he replied. "Met 'er in the village and 'eard the whole story from 'er own lips, I did. No, no," he continued, as I produced some money, "the drinks are with me, mister. You don't pay for nothin' in this 'ouse—not to-night."

"Splendid!" said Peter. "In that case I'll have a pint of beer."

"The same for me," I added, "only I'm afraid Miss Franklyn has given you a wrong impression. You mustn't run away with the idea that we've done anything the least heroic. We just happened to be around when we were wanted, but it was her own pluck and sense that saved her."

"Aye, she's plenty o' them," was his answer. "All the same, if it weren't for you I reckon she'd be feedin' the fishes, an' that's good enough for Sam Bassett."

He filled up three large tankards, two of which he pushed across to us.

"Feedin' the fishes," he repeated, "that's what she'd be, and I wouldn't 'ave nothin' 'appen to that lass, not for all the money in the Bank of England."

I seated myself on a stool, and, picking up

my pewter, took a long pull at its cool and refreshing contents.

"You've known Miss Franklyn for some time," I suggested.

He laughed. "As long as she's known 'erself, sir. Why, Lord bless you, it was me as taught 'er to sail a boat. A mere slip of a child she were when she first started, not more'n eleven or twelve."

"You taught her pretty well," put in Peter, "judging by the way she handled that cutter of hers."

Mr. Bassett nodded. "She didn't need much larnin'," he observed. "Took to it like a duck to water, she did, and if only she'd stick to the river she'd be as right as rain. It's this 'ere goin' out to sea single-'anded that I don't 'old with. She's as active as a cat and can swim like a fish, but she'll be drownded one o' these days, as I've told 'er time an' agen."

"Hasn't she anyone to look after her?" I asked.

"Never 'as 'ad," replied our host. "She done just as she like, even when 'er father were alive. A pleasant, well-meanin' gentleman, Mr. Franklyn, but that there set on books an' studyin' that 'e couldn't even take care of 'is own money, let alone worryin' 'isself about 'is darter." He tilted up his tankard, and, having disposed of the greater part of its contents, set it down again with a sigh and a shake of his head. "Per'aps 'e weren't altogether to blame,

though—not if there's any truth in what folks say."

"Do you mean the old yarn about the monks having put a curse on the property?" asked Peter. "Surely no one believes in that sort of thing nowadays?"

Mr. Bassett pursed up his lips. "Well, sir, I ain't no scholar, as I expect you be; all the same, I've lived in this world sixty-two year come next August, and I seen some funny goin's-on in my time." He paused reflectively. "Monks is monks," he added, "that's what I say, an' the less you get up against them sort of people the better."

"Still, from what you've told us," I objected, "Mr. Franklyn seems to have brought his troubles on himself."

"Mebbe 'e did," was the answer, "an' mebbe it were poor Mr. Ashton's fault that 'e fell over the cliff an' broke 'is neck. Some think one way, some another."

"Who was Mr. Ashton?" I inquired encouragingly.

"Why, the gentleman as bought the 'All when it were put up for sale. It didn't bring 'im much luck, monks or no monks. Found dead one morning at the foot o' Bredbridge 'Ill—smashed to a jelly."

"What a horrible business!" I exclaimed. "How did it happen?"

"Seems 'e got wanderin' about there in the dark and just walked over the edge. Leastways,

that were what the coroner said, and if there's some as don't agree with 'im—well, it's a free country, and folk can do as they like." He paused, looking past me out of the window. "'Ere's a man comin' now who could tell you more about it than I can, and that's Cap'n Gull, Mr. Medlicot's skipper. It weren't far from 'is cottage that they picked up the corpse."

There was a crunch of heavy footsteps on the gravel outside, and a moment later the new arrival strode in through the doorway. He was a huge, broad-shouldered man, with a short, grizzled beard, dressed in the customary blue reefer suit and wearing a peaked yachting cap.

Glancing sharply at Peter and myself, he came forward to the bar, where he nodded to Mr. Bassett.

"The usual, Sam," he said curtly. "Double rum with a drop o' water in it."

He pulled out half a crown, which he tossed down on the counter, and then waited silently while our host measured out the order.

"Funny you should 'ave dropped in," observed the latter, as he pushed over the change. "We were just talkin' o' you in a manner o' speakin'."

"Talkin' o' me?" repeated the skipper.

"Well, not exac'ly o' you—at least, nothin' personal. These gentlemen were askin' about Mr. Ashton, and I were tellin' 'em 'e fell over the cliff up above your cottage."

The man turned slowly and subjected us to a long, searching stare.

"And who might you be?" he demanded.

His tone was so insolent, and his whole manner so offensive, that I found some difficulty in keeping my temper.

"I might be the Archbishop of Canterbury," I said, "but, as it happens, I'm not."

"There's nothin' to upset yourself about, cap'n," broke in Mr. Bassett. "These gentlemen are strangers 'ere—friends o' Miss Franklyn. They——"

"If they're strangers," interrupted the other, "what's Mr. Ashton's death got to do with them?"

Peter, who was sitting next him, smiled amiably.

"Don't ask me," he said. "I can never enjoy beer and guess riddles at the same time."

"We don't favour too much curiosity from strangers," continued the skipper truculently. "We mind our own business 'ere in Bredbridge."

"Indeed," I said. "Well, as your business seems to be drinking rum, the quicker you get on with it the better."

Mr. Bassett, who was staring in a puzzled fashion from one to the other of us, again interposed.

"Now, come, come," he said. "We don't want to 'ave no unpleasantness. Damned if I

know what's the matter with you, Gull! A stranger can put a civil question if he like, the same as anyone else."

Somewhat to my surprise, the landlord's rebuke appeared to have an immediate effect, for with a sudden change of expression our new acquaintance turned back towards the bar.

"Maybe I spoke a bit hasty," he muttered in a gruff voice. "All the same, to my thinking there's been a deal too much of this here tittle-tattle about Mr. Ashton. When a man's dead, let 'im rest in his grave."

He spat on the floor, and then, tossing off his drink, set down the glass with a defiant bang and walked sullenly out of the place.

There was a brief silence.

"That's a genial bird," said Peter carelessly. "Is he always as pleasant and chatty?"

For a moment Mr. Bassett made no reply. He was staring at the empty doorway, his mouth open and a look of indignant surprise on his fat, good-natured face.

"I beg your pardon, gentlemen," he said slowly. "If I'd a' known you were goin' to be insulted in my 'ouse——"

"There's nothing to apologise about," I interrupted. "You're not responsible for every surly lunatic who happens to roll up."

"What's the matter with the fellow?" inquired Peter. "Does he often break out in this fashion?"

"Not to my knowledge," was the answer. "'E ain't exac'ly what you'd call a sociable party, but 'e been in 'ere scores o' times, and I've never 'ad no trouble with 'im before. Goin' the same way as 'is son, it seem to me."

"Do you mean that extraordinary-looking hunchback?" I asked. "We saw him on *The Flying Cloud* when we were coming up the river. He's quite an idiot, isn't he, and dumb into the bargain?"

"Dumb, sure enough," admitted the landlord, "but 'e ain't too much of an idjut to make a good sailor."

"So Miss Franklyn was telling us," I explained. "She said that he and his father ran the ship entirely."

"Fancy saddling oneself with a pair of beauties like that!" observed Peter. "I don't know the owner, but he must be a damned good-natured chap to put up with them."

Mr. Bassett leaned forward.

"You ain't far wrong, sir," he remarked impressively. "You wouldn't find a kinder-'earted gentleman than Mr. Medlicot, not if you were to search England through and through."

CHAPTER VII

WITH an empty pipe in my mouth, and the sun caressing my back, I sat contentedly on the warm cabin-top. The tide made a gentle ripple as it lapped against the side of the boat, while from somewhere ashore the distant music of church bells floated through the still air.

I looked down at Peter, who had brought up one of the bunk cushions and was sprawled out full length on the after-deck.

"What do you say?" I suggested. "Shall we have a go at some of those repairs?"

He opened his eyes lazily. "As a strict Sabbatarian," he replied. "I have the gravest objection to doing anything useful on Sunday. Besides," he added, "I thought you said you'd have to go over to Eastport to get the stuff you wanted."

"So I did," I agreed. "All the same, there are one or two small things we might tackle—nice, easy little jobs that will just give you an appetite for lunch."

He shook his head. "I don't want too much of an appetite," he objected, "not until I've seen how Jean cooks."

I laughed. "Perhaps you're right, Peter," I admitted. "It's a heavenly morning, and there's some excuse for loafing in place like this. Look at the sun on that sea lavender!"

He sat up reluctantly. "It reminds me of Bishop Heber," he said. "'Where every prospect pleases, and only man is vile.'"

"If you're alluding to me——" I began.

"I am alluding to the gentleman we met at the pub last night. I don't want to be uncharitable, especially on the Sabbath, but, judging by the little I saw of him, he certainly struck me as being a blot on the landscape."

"I mean to keep my eye on Captain Gull," I said slowly. "A man doesn't flare out suddenly like that for no reason, and the more I've thought it over the queerer it seems. I wonder if there was anything fishy in the way that chap Ashton met with his death?"

"I shouldn't be surprised," said Peter. "There's evidently some dirty work going on in this idyllic spot, and——"

He broke off abruptly as the unmistakable splutter of an Evinrud engine mingled itself with the chiming of the bells.

"Now who the devil's this?" he added. "Some local resident on his way to church, I suppose. He can't be going to the pub, because it doesn't open till one."

We both sat staring with interest at the small dinghy which, manned by a solitary occupant, had just bustled into view round the next bend.

"It's probably the amiable Mr. Medlicot," I said. "He's the only person who is likely o be chasing around here at this time in the morning."

I had scarcely finished speaking when the boat suddenly altered its course, and, leaving the centre of the river, headed directly for where we were lying.

"Why, he's coming to pay us a call," I exclaimed. "Button up your collar, Peter, and try to look like a respectable yachtsman."

I slid down from my perch, and, making my way forward, stood in the bows awaiting our approaching visitor. As he came nearer I saw that he was a plump, clean-shaven man of about forty-five, with a sunburned face and large gold-rimmed spectacles. There was a sort of easy-going good nature about his whole appearance which attracted me to him at once.

Bringing his boat neatly alongside, he switched off the engine and looked up at me with a friendly smile.

"Excuse my bursting in upon you like this," he said. "My name is Medlicot, and I live at Bredbridge Hall, just up the river. I heard you were here from our young friend Miss Franklyn, so I thought I'd roll along and introduce myself."

"I'm very glad you did," I said. "Won't you come on board?"

"Thanks," he replied. "I shall be delighted to, if I'm not in the way."

He passed me over the painter, which I made fast to a cleat, and then, moving with the quick deftness of a man who is thoroughly at home in

his surroundings, he climbed nimbly up on the yacht's deck.

"Mr. Cameron, I suppose?" he said, offering me his hand. "I can recognise you from Jean's description." He gave me a hearty shake. "I've heard all about the way you and your friend saved her life yesterday—a fine bit of seamanship, and, if you don't mind my saying so, a jolly plucky act too."

"You're the second person who has accused us of being heroes," I protested. "It's astounding how quickly a false rumour gets about." I turned to Peter, who had hoisted himself up from his cushion and sauntered forward to join us. "This is my friend, Dr. West," I added. "He'll be frightfully indignant if you say anything like that to him."

"It's nothing to do with me," returned our new acquaintance laughingly. "You must put the blame entirely upon Miss Jean."

"When did you see her?" I asked.

"Last night," was his reply. "I was told she'd come in on a strange craft, and, knowing she'd been out sailing in her own little cutter, I called round at the Abbey to hear what had happened. Judging by her description, it seems to have been a precious close thing."

"She ought to have been in bed," said Peter disapprovingly. "How is she—any the worse for her adventure?"

"Not a scrap, as far as I could see. The only point which appeared to have upset her in

the slightest was the fact that she'd lost her boat."

"She's got some guts, that girl," observed Peter, with a kind of professional enthusiasm. "After what she went through yesterday most young women would be lying on a sofa sucking up sal volatile."

Medlicot laughed. "Perhaps there's something in birth and tradition after all. Miss Jean comes of a very old Suffolk family who have lived at Bredbridge ever since the Flood. The people about here have a tremendous respect and affection for her. I'm a mere interloper myself, but I can understand their enthusiasm, and share it to the full."

He accepted a cigarette from the case which Peter offered him, and tapping it on the back of his hand, threw an appreciative glance round *The Skylark's* deck.

"It was a nasty place you picked up—that spit off the Blacksand," he said. "You were lucky to have a stout, well-built ship under you. I hope she came through without any serious damage?"

"Nothing to speak of," I replied. "There are a few odd jobs which will keep me busy for a day or two, but on the whole we got off uncommonly lightly." I paused. "Would you like to come below and have a look round?" I added.

No sailing man, however incurious he may be, can resist the offer to inspect another owner's

vessel, and, despite some conventional protest to the effect that he was taking up too much of our time, it was with an air of pleased alacrity that our guest accompanied us to the cabin.

I did the honours to the best of my ability, calling his attention to our famous teak panelling and pointing out the various gadgets which I had fixed up in order to make *The Skylark* more comfortable.

Of these, the one which seemed to interest him most was the bookshelf—a patent invention of my own, with a hinged flap that prevented its contents from tumbling out even in the roughest weather.

"Now that's very ingenious," he said, fingering it approvingly. "Books are rather a problem in a ship, especially if they're of any value and you don't want them damaged." He ran his eye along the different titles. "I see we have some tastes in common besides sailing," he continued. "Boswell and Fitzgerald are both particular friends of mine—always fresh and delightful, no matter how often you've read them."

"That's just the reason why I take them with me," I explained. "As long as I've got a few books like that on board, I can get along quite happily, even by myself."

"Do you do much single-handed work?" he asked, seating himself on the bunk.

"Not if I can help it," I replied. "Unfortunately, most of my pals are busy people.

Here's Peter, for instance—clearing off to-morrow and leaving me to do all the repairs."

"Couldn't he stay on another day?" suggested our visitor. "I was going to try and persuade you both to come and dine with me Monday evening. I can't ask you to-night, because I've promised to run over and look up some friends at Eastport."

Peter shook his head. "Thanks very much, but I'm afraid it's impossible. I must be back in Town by seven at the latest."

"Well, I hope I shall see *you*, anyhow," said Medlicot, turning to me. "I haven't much to offer you in the way of entertainment, unless by any chance you happen to be keen on botany. If you are, it might interest you to look over my collection."

"I am sure it will," I replied. "However ignorant I am about a subject, I always enjoy listening to an expert. It's such a delightfully easy way of improving one's mind."

"Oh, I'm only a very modest amateur," he returned, smiling. "It's just an idle man's hobby with me. I collect flowers in the same spirit that my neighbours shoot birds and hit little white balls into holes; for some obscure reason I find it more amusing." With a glance at the clock he rose to his feet. "I'll expect you about half-past seven on Monday, then. You know how to get to my place? Follow that path across the saltings and turn to the left up the Eastport road." He paused. "Though,

for the matter of that, there's no need for you to walk. I'll send my man along to fetch you in the dinghy."

The thought of renewing my acquaintance with Captain Gull under these conditions rather appealed to my fancy.

"Thanks," I said. "I suppose it doesn't matter about my not having any evening clothes?"

"Good heavens, no," he replied. "Come just as you are, of course."

We both escorted him on deck, where, having once more expressed his regret that Peter would be unable to accompany me, he got back into the dinghy and started up the engine. A few minutes later we saw him turn and wave his hand as he disappeared rapidly round the point.

"I never knew botanists were like that," I said, after a lengthy pause. "I always pictured them as gaunt, solemn people with long whiskers."

"You're mixing them up with butterfly collectors," said Peter. He gazed down the river to the spot where our guest had vanished. "What did you make of him, James?" he asked.

"I rather like him," I said. "He seems an affable sort of bloke, and he evidently has the sense to appreciate Jean."

"I can understand that," returned Peter; "it's her friendliness towards him that surprises

me. If anyone squatted down on my family property, I should loathe the sight of him."

"She must be getting used to the position by now," I remarked. "After all, this chap didn't actually buy the place; he merely inherited it from his cousin."

"That's just as bad," grunted Peter. He sat silent for a moment or two, chewing reflectively at a cigarette. "By the way," he went on, "has it occurred to you that we did a pretty insane thing last night when we went ashore?"

"What do you mean?" I inquired.

"Why, leaving that book of yours behind us. If any of the local sportsmen are mixed up in this stunt, you don't suppose that they haven't heard of your arrival? The whole countryside seems to be humming with the news."

A sudden uneasy feeling took possession of me.

"By Jove, that's true, Peter," I exclaimed. "Someone might have nipped on board and pinched it. I'm going to have a look now, just to make sure that it's all right."

I dived down through the hatch, and, pulling forward my bag, which was on one of the outside bunks, hastily unfastened the straps. To my immense relief, the Coryat was still reposing safely where I had left it, and, bringing it up with me, I exhibited it triumphantly to Peter.

"No harm done," I said, "but it was a damned

piece of carelessness all the same. I'll take good care that Mr. Skinner and his friends don't get a second chance at it."

"What do you propose to do?" asked Peter. "Lug it around under your arm?"

"No," I replied. "I've got a better notion than that."

I seated myself on the deck, and, opening the book, produced my penknife.

"I'm going to cut out the title-page," I explained. "I'm almost certain it's the inscription they want, and as long as I've got that safe in my pocket they can burgle the ship until they're blue in the face."

Leaning negligently against the boom, Peter watched my proceedings with an amused grin.

"It's extraordinary what an effect a pretty face has upon a strong man," he remarked. "Nothing else in the world would induce you to mutilate a seventeenth-century book."

Very carefully I slit through the thin, time-worn paper, and, folding up the page, put it away in my note-case. Then I looked at my watch.

"You had better begin making yourself clean and tidy, Peter," I said. "We shall have to start in about an hour and a half."

CHAPTER VIII

WE stood in front of the rusty iron gate and looked up the neglected drive overshadowed with trees and bushes.

"This must be the place, Peter," I said. "Jean told us it was quite close to the bridge."

"It's a good entrance for a haunted Abbey," he observed. "Just the right touch of gloom and mystery. There ought to be a notice-board up with 'Beware of the Father Superior.'"

He pushed open the gate, and, following the moss-grown pathway for about twenty yards, we suddenly came out into full view of the ancestral home of the Franklyn family.

It was like a miniature edition of Glastonbury —a mere shell of crumbling grey ruins, with grass and brambles growing up round its broken walls. The inhabited part—a narrow, three-storey dwelling-house at one end—had evidently been constructed out of the fallen masonry, though most of it was now hidden beneath a thick mat of creepers. In front of this eccentric residence was a small garden, separated from the open ground beyond by a circular wooden fence.

"My sainted aunt!" remarked Peter with some feeling. "Fancy living here in December and January!"

As he spoke a door in the paling opened

and Jean herself stepped out into the sunshine. It was the first time we had seen her dressed as a girl, and in her short white skirt and knitted silk jersey she made such a dainty and charming picture that one could almost imagine the ghosts of the old monks peeping at her appreciatively from beneath their cowls.

She came forward, smiling gaily, and shook hands with both of us.

"I hope we're not very late," I said. "I had a frightful job getting Peter ready."

"You've timed it beautifully," she replied. "If you'd arrived a minute earlier you'd have found me in a cap and apron."

"Well, we needn't ask you how you are," broke in Peter. "I've never seen anyone look so shamelessly healthy in my life."

"I've got a colour from stooping over the fire," she explained. "Poor old Mary isn't at all well this morning, so I made her stop in bed and cooked the lunch myself."

"What's the matter with her?" asked Peter, as we turned towards the house.

"I don't know. She's in pain, and she can't breathe comfortably. I wanted to send for Dr. Grant, but she wouldn't hear of it."

"I'll pop in and have a look at her before we go," said Peter. "She won't mind talking to me; I have a special attraction for elderly domestics."

Jean smiled at him gratefully. "Thank you very much," she said. "I really don't know

what I should do without you and Mr. Cameron."

She led the way through into the garden, where, on a patch of lawn, amid a riot of larkspur, snapdragon, and other old-fashioned flowers, a small table with a white cloth on it was already laid for lunch.

"I thought we'd turn the party into a picnic," she said. "It will be much jollier out here, especially if one of you will smoke and keep the gnats off."

"Peter's cigarettes will do that," I assured her. "The question is whether gnats aren't the lesser evil of the two."

"Not if one's wearing silk stockings," she retorted.

Peter took off his hat, and, using it as a fan, seated himself complacently in the nearest chair.

"You can entrust your ankles to me with perfect confidence," he said. "I'll get on with the good work while you and Jimmy are bringing out the lunch."

"I don't really want any assistance," protested Jean. "Still, if you'd like to come and help me dish up the potatoes——"

"I should revel in it," I said with enthusiasm; and, leaving Peter to his self-appointed office, we started off together towards the house.

"Who built this interesting château?" I asked.

"My grandfather," she answered. "He hated to have people staying at the Hall, and whenever

my grandmother asked anybody he used to come across and stop here. It's quite a small place really—just a library and a kitchen on the ground floor, with four rooms above. That's my bedroom—that top one on the left, looking out towards the river."

The front door was open, and, turning to the right as we entered, she conducted me into a low-ceilinged kitchen, where a couple of saucepans were boiling away cheerfully on an old-fashioned range.

"I hadn't time to get you very much," she said. "Just a cold duckling and some peas and potatoes. The only other thing I could think of was a currant and raspberry tart."

"It sounds perfect," I said. "Exactly the meal I should ask for if I were going to be hanged."

"That's not very polite to my pastry," she laughed. "You'll have to eat it now, whether it's a failure or not."

She ladled out the vegetables into their respective dishes, and placed them on a tray which already contained a loaf of bread.

"There you are," she said, handing it to me. "I'll bring the duck and the cream. I left them in the library, because it's nice and cool there."

Laden with my spoils, I returned to the garden, where I found Peter puffing away contentedly in his chair.

"You'd make a splendid waiter," he said. "You've got exactly the right walk."

"Be careful," I replied, putting down the tray. "There's cold duck for lunch, and it's quite likely that I shall be asked to carve."

Raising himself with an effort, Peter lifted up the covers of the two dishes.

"Cold duck, peas, and new potatoes!" he murmured softly. "By Jove, James, I think I shall propose to this child. She's the only girl I ever met who really understands me."

"You stick to bug-hunting, my lad," I said kindly. "That's the job Nature intended you for. Chasing dryads is a bit outside your scope."

As I spoke, Jean emerged from the house carrying another tray, and, with a sudden spasmodic movement, Peter gripped me by the arm.

"Look!" he exclaimed in a kind of awed whisper. "If that isn't a bottle of fizz she's got there!"

Stepping lightly over the grass, our hostess advanced to the table, where she dumped down her burden with a triumphant smile.

"I hope you both like champagne?" she said. "It's the only drink we've got except water."

Peter picked up the bottle and examined the label.

"Veuve Clicquot 1919," he remarked reverently. "You don't mean to tell me that this came from 'The Green Man'?"

"Oh, no," she answered. "It's the last of some wine that my father bought before we left the Hall. I've been keeping it carefully for some really great occasion."

"You mustn't waste it on us," I protested. "We're not a great occasion; and, besides, Peter loves water."

"It's not very good water here," she said gravely, "especially for people who aren't accustomed to it."

She placed the duck and cream on the table, and, standing the empty tray against a neighbouring tree-trunk, pulled up our two remaining chairs.

"You open the bottle, Dr. West," she added, "and we'll leave Mr. Cameron to do the carving. I'll sit in the middle, and then I can talk to both of you."

"That sounds a fair arrangement," said Peter, who was already wrestling with the wire. "But don't you think it would save a lot of trouble if we all called each other by our Christian names? Nobody addresses me as Dr. West except the income tax man."

Jean nodded. "I very nearly did it then," she admitted. "I don't know why, but somehow or other I feel as if I'd known you both for ages."

"Of course you do," agreed Peter. "Didn't

you jump bang into my arms the first time we met?"

She glanced at him laughingly. "Only in preference to being drowned," she said.

"Bravo, Jean!" I remarked. "That will teach him not to insult young and defenceless girls."

"I've met with nothing but rebuffs ever since I've been here," observed Peter, pouring out the wine. "Look at the crushing way in which Captain Gull repelled my offers of friendship!"

Jean sat up abruptly.

"We ran across him yesterday evening at 'The Green Man,'" I explained.

"A large, truculent gentleman with whiskers." continued Peter. "He really was uncommonly rude both to Jimmy and me. If I hadn't a singularly sweet disposition, and if he hadn't been quite so big, I should have punched him in the jaw."

Jean hesitated. "You must make allowances for Captain Gull," she said. "I know he's rather queer and surly at times, but he's had some terrible trouble in his life."

"I'm not surprised," said Peter. "He very nearly had some more last night."

"What sort of trouble, Jean?" I asked.

"Well, that poor hunchback, Ben, you saw in the boat wasn't his only child. There was a daughter as well, to whom he was absolutely devoted. Alice was her name, and she was one

of the prettiest girls I ever saw. One night about three years ago she went out and drowned herself at the foot of the cliffs."

"Drowned herself!" I exclaimed. "What, intentionally?"

Jean nodded. "She was going to have a baby," she said simply.

For a moment we both sat there without speaking.

"In that case I withdraw my criticism," remarked Peter. "One can't expect a man who had a knock-out like that to be altogether genial."

"It seems to be rather a tragic spot, that part of the cliff," I said. "Wasn't it somewhere close by where Ashton was killed?"

"Almost the same place," she answered. "I don't think there's a soul in the neighbourhood who would go up on Bredbridge Hill after dark. Most of them give it a wide berth even in the daytime."

"I wonder how Medlicot enjoys living at the Hall?" I said. "He seems cheerful enough, but it must be rather a lonely existence if his only neighbours are Gull and that half-witted son."

"You've met Mr. Medlicot?" she asked.

I nodded. "He came along in his boat after breakfast. I've promised to dine with him to-morrow night."

"I'm so glad you've made friends," she said. "I'm sure you'll both like him—everybody does."

"I shan't get the chance," observed Peter disconsolately. "My poor little holiday fizzles out to-morrow. By the way, do you know anything about the trains to London?"

"There's one from Woodtown at four, which gets in at five-thirty. The station's about two miles from here."

"That will do nicely," he answered. "If I behave very well during the rest of lunch, perhaps you'll stand at the gate and wave to me as I go past?"

"I've got a better idea than that," I said. "Why shouldn't we give a return banquet? Supposing Jean lunches with us on board——"

"Capital," he broke in. "Then you can both come to Woodtown and put me in the train. It's a desolate job going off all by oneself."

"What do you say, Jean?" I asked. "Do you think you could stand our society three days running?"

She laughed. "I might. It all depends on how Mary is. I shouldn't like to leave her alone again unless she's a little better."

"Don't you worry about Mary," returned Peter. "I'll fix her as soon as I've digested this duck."

"There's the tart yet," said Jean, jumping up from her seat. "You're not going to get out of that, after all the trouble I took in making it."

She vanished into the house, returning a few

minutes later with the fruit of her labours, which she deposited proudly in the centre of the table.

"Here it is," she said, "and, what's more, Mary's got up and come downstairs. I scolded her so for doing it that she's agreed to see you without making any further fuss."

"Then there's no need to hurry ourselves," observed Peter contentedly. "A patient who has been properly scolded should always be allowed time to recover."

It was a doctrine which met with my entire approval, for, apart from the fact that I was extremely comfortable where I was, I felt a very active objection to the thought of breaking up our party. I wanted to go on sitting there in the sunshine, and watching Jean's slim figure and animated face as she turned smilingly from one to the other of us. In my own mind I couldn't help contrasting her with the girls I knew in London, and imagining how insufferably bored most of them would be if Fate had planted them down in a ruined Abbey with no other society but that of an old family servant. It was an unfair comparison, of course, but, even allowing for Jean's simple upbringing, there was an unaffected cheerfulness in the way she accepted the situation which would have warmed the heart of anyone but a confirmed dyspeptic.

So frankly happy, indeed, did she seem for the moment, that, urgent as the matter was, I

couldn't bring myself to the point of explaining the real reason for our visit to Bredbridge. I felt that, even if she had never heard of Mr. Skinner, and could make no sense out of the cipher, the story I had to tell could hardly fail to puzzle and upset her. It would be far better I decided, to put off my disclosures until the following afternoon. I should have an excellent chance of introducing the subject during our walk back from Woodtown, and, that being the case, there seemed no adequate reason for dropping a bomb into our present enjoyable gathering.

Whether it was the effect of the champagne or merely the charm of Jean's society I can't say, but the time slipped away so rapidly that, on glancing at my watch, I was suddenly amazed to find that it was a quarter to four.

"By Jove, Peter!" I exclaimed, "do you know that we've been sitting here talking for nearly three hours?"

He blew out a cloud of cigarette smoke, and settled himself more comfortably in his chair.

"Well, why shouldn't we?" he inquired. "People in the City take much longer than that over their lunch."

"You get up at once and go and have a look at your patient," I said sternly. "Just because I let you slack this morning you needn't imagine it's a whole holiday. There are several jobs I want your help with, and if they're not done

to-night you won't be able to go back to London."

With a reluctant sigh Peter hoisted himself to his feet.

"You see how I'm bullied, Jean," he remarked. "Don't you ever go sailing with him, or you'll probably be treated in the same way."

"Oh, I'm a girl," said Jean tranquilly. "He wouldn't dare speak to me like that."

"Well, it's no good my interviewing Mary," I observed. "While you two are away I'll get on with the washing up."

Jean shook her head. "Visitors aren't allowed to wash up," she replied. "You'd better come inside and wait for us in the library."

Without further discussion, she led the way back to the porch, and, taking me by the arm as we entered, piloted me into the room on the left, the door of which was partly open.

"These are what are left of father's books," she said. "I don't know if there's anything that will interest you, but, if not, you must just sit down in the armchair and make yourself comfy. We won't be longer than we can help."

She rejoined Peter, who was standing placidly in the doorway, and, crossing the passage, the two of them disappeared into the kitchen.

Now that I was alone, and in the very room from which the torn-out page in my pocket book had apparently come, a sobering feeling of responsibility suddenly took possession of me. I was already convinced that if any attempt were being made to rob or defraud Jean, she herself was utterly unconscious of the fact. It was possible, of course, when I explained matters to her the next day, that she might be able to make some guess at the truth, but, failing this, the job which I had taken on my shoulders certainly showed no sign of becoming any easier. We had been at Bredbridge now for over twenty-four hours, and, except for the accident which had enabled us to secure Jean's friendship and confidence, we were exactly as far from solving the mystery as when we had sailed out from the mouth of the Thames.

With a humiliating sense of my deficiencies as a detective, I walked forward to the nearest shelf and proceeded to inspect its contents. They were a depressing lot, from the point of view of the average reader, the majority of them consisting of almost forgotten seventeenth- and eighteenth-century writers, some of whom were little more than names even to a student of the period like myself. Judging, indeed, by the amount of ancient but worthless trash, I was driven to the conclusion that the collection was due not so much to the efforts of Jean's father as to the individual taste of the various owners who had preceded him. The idea immediately

occurred to me that amongst these early editions there might be others which had once belonged to my own particular Henry Franklyn, and, in the vain hope of discovering some similar inscription, I began to hunt along the shelves for any volumes which appeared to be of about the same date.

I had examined at least a dozen, and was still engaged in the same fruitless task, when steps and voices sounded from outside, and Peter and Jean reappeared in the doorway. The moment I saw them I instinctively felt that something was amiss.

"Well," I inquired, speaking as cheerfully as possible, "and what's the verdict?"

Jean came slowly towards me.

"Not very good," she said in her quiet, steady way. "Mary has got rather a bad attack of bronchitis, and he thinks she ought to go into hospital for two or three weeks."

"Much the simplest and wisest thing to do with her," remarked Peter. "In a case like this it's all a question of proper nursing and medical attention. You take my advice and send her straight along to the Ipswich Infirmary."

"Supposing they can't have her?" I suggested. "They may be full up."

"I'll see to that," was his reply. "I know Carruthers, the house surgeon there. He's an old Guy's man, and he used to be rather a pal

of mine. We'll walk along to the post office now, and try to get through to him on the 'phone. I've no doubt he can wangle it for us somehow."

"But how will you manage?" I asked, turning to Jean. "You can't stop here without anybody."

"Why not?" she asked. "I'm quite able to look after myself." She paused. "Besides," she added, "if I get frightfully lonely, I can row over and talk to you."

"Any port in a storm," said Peter. He stepped forward to where Jean was standing, and patted her encouragingly on the shoulder. "Don't you worry, my child," he continued. "Mary will be all right; I give you my word for it. I'll see that everything's arranged before to-morrow, and if you're in any difficulties after I've gone, you couldn't have a better counsellor than our old friend Jim. He looks stupid, but——"

With a half tearful little laugh, Jean held out a hand to each of us.

"You're two dears," she said. "I feel as if you'd been sent from London specially to get me out of trouble."

CHAPTER IX

THERE was a shrill whistle in the distance, and away down the line a trail of smoke suddenly appeared above the tree-tops.

"Here's your train coming now, Peter," I said.

We all three got up from the bench on which we had been sitting, while the stationmaster, who was evidently determined not to be cheated out of his rights, strode briskly forward to the edge of the platform.

"London, London," he announced vociferously. "First stop Colchester."

"This is very painful," observed Peter. "I feel just like a small boy going back to school."

"Try to be brave about it," I said encouragingly. "If you get wistful we shall probably burst into tears."

"It's not like saying good-bye altogether," put in Jean. "You've promised to come down again next Friday or Saturday."

"That's a devil of a way off," objected Peter; "especially when you have to spend the interval with American doctors."

Puffing its way into the station, the train came to a standstill, and, with an inviting gesture, the solitary porter jerked open the door of an empty third-class smoker.

"Got everything you want?" I asked, as Peter mounted the step.

"Everything, thanks," he replied. "I was a little short of baccy, so I've pinched yours. You'll be able to get some more in the village."

He tipped the man, and, having closed the carriage door, leaned out towards us through the open window.

"There's one thing I've forgotten after all," he added. "It would cheer me up hugely if I might kiss Jean."

"Why, of course," said Jean. "After what you've done for Mary I should like to hug you in front of everybody."

She put up her face, and, bending down, Peter implanted a brotherly salute on either cheek.

"That's one for me and one for Jim," he said. "Not that he deserves it, after the shameful way he has been deceiving you."

"Deceiving me about what?" asked Jean.

"You'd better make him tell you," was the answer. "In my opinion——"

"Stand back there, please!" came the imperious voice of the stationmaster.

The engine gave a warning screech, and, catching hold of Jean's arm, I pulled her away from the footboard.

"All right, Peter," I said, shaking my fist. "You wait until I get you on board *The Skylark*!"

He took off his hat to us with a mocking grin, and a few seconds later Jean and I were gazing

at the tail lamp on the guard's van as it swung away rapidly up the line.

It was she who was the first to break the silence.

"What did he mean? Have you really been deceiving me—Jim?"

"Not exactly," I said. "There's something I've got to tell you, but I thought I'd wait until we were alone. These last two days have been so jolly, it seemed a pity to spoil the fun."

She wrinkled up her forehead in a half-puzzled, half-humorous inquiry.

"Is it as serious as all that?" she asked.

I caught the stationmaster's eye fixed on us in a disapproving stare, and I suddenly realised that I was still holding her arm.

"Look here, Jean," I said, dropping my hand, "you're pretty familiar with this respectable neighbourhood. Do you know any place near here where we could get a cup of tea and have a quiet talk? I can always explain things better when I'm sitting down."

She thought for a moment. "There's old Mrs. Rudman, the confectioner, just up the road. She has a room at the back which I'm sure she'll let us use if we ask her nicely."

"Let's go and try, then," I suggested. "That stationmaster's scowling at us horribly. I expect he was jealous at seeing you kiss Peter."

"But I didn't," protested Jean. "I only let him kiss me."

She led the way out through the booking-office, and, walking a few yards along the sleepy main street, we arrived at a quaint, old-fashioned little shop, with cakes and loaves of bread piled up in its bow windows. As we entered, a small elderly woman with a face like a Ribston pippin stepped out from behind the counter.

"Well, there now!" she exclaimed, "if it isn't Miss Franklyn! And it's only half an hour ago that Sam Bassett was in here telling me that you'd been nearly drowned."

"I believe he's quite annoyed I wasn't," laughed Jean. "He's been prophesying something of the sort for years." She paused. "This is Mr. Cameron, who came along in his boat and pulled me out," she added.

With a rather flustered air, Mrs. Rudman dropped me a curtsey.

"We've just been seeing a friend of his off to London," continued Jean, "and I wondered whether you'd be so nice as to let us have a cup of tea in your back room?"

"Why, to be sure," was the answer. "The kettle's on the stove, so I shan't keep you more than a few minutes."

She ushered us through a glass door into what was evidently her own private sanctum—a small apartment furnished with horsehair chairs, antimacassars, wax fruit, and other faded relics of Victorian luxury. It was all spotlessly clean, however, and, taking our places at the

table, Jean and I waited contentedly while our worthy hostess bustled to and fro, attending to our requirements.

"There you are, my dears," she said, as she brought in the tray. "Now you make a good tea, and don't you hurry yourselves. If the young gentleman wishes to smoke his cigarette after, why, he's quite welcome to do it."

She beamed on us both with a kind of motherly encouragement, and then, going back into the shop, closed the door behind her.

"Everyone seems to like you, Jean," I said, "with the possible exception of the station-master."

"Oh, well, he's a stranger," she answered, smiling. "Mrs. Rudman and Sam have known me ever since I was born." She picked up the pot and began to pour out. "Please tell me what this wonderful secret is," she added coaxingly. "I'm so full of curiosity I can't eat anything until you do."

"You'd better have a bit of bread and butter," I suggested, handing her the plate. "It's a long story, and I don't want you to faint away in the middle of it." I pulled my chair a shade nearer. "About three weeks ago, Jean," I said, "you sold a packet of books to a certain Mr. Wiltshire of Charing Cross Road."

She looked up quickly. "That's quite true, but how do you know?"

"Because I bought one of them," I replied;

"a first edition of an old volume of travels, called *Coryat's Crudities*."

She sat perfectly still, staring at me with wide-open eyes.

"You bought it!" she repeated. "*You!*"

I nodded. "Yes," I said, "I paid twenty-five pounds for it. Why does it interest you so much?"

She made a little gesture with her hands.

"Never mind now; I'll explain later. I want to hear what you've got to tell me first."

It was evident from her excitement that she was already aware of some mystery in connection with the book, so, without beating about the bush any longer, I embarked straight away upon my story.

Starting with Mr. Skinner and my refusal of his offer, I went on to acquaint her as rapidly and faithfully as I could with the whole series of remarkable developments which had followed upon that gentleman's visit. I told of our discovery of the inscription, the attempted burglary, the appearance of the inspector, and my subsequent interview with Mr. Wiltshire, and, finally, I described how Peter and I, after talking things over on the ship, had determined to sail round to Bredbridge and present ourselves at the Abbey.

"You must forgive our barging into your private affairs like this," I concluded, "but we couldn't help feeling that there was some

dirty work going on, and we thought it was up to us to let you know." I paused. "Besides," I added, "I should like to meet Mr. Skinner again, if only for the mere pleasure of kicking his behind."

Jean, who had been listening to me throughout with rapt attention, broke into a sudden ripple of laughter.

"It's just exactly what he wants," she said. "I hope you'll do it really hard, and I hope you'll let me watch."

"You don't mean to say you know the little beast?" I demanded.

"Yes," she said, "I know him; at least, I'm pretty sure it must be the same man. He came and tried to buy the book from me just after Mr. Wiltshire had gone. He offered me forty pounds for it."

"Had you ever seen him before?" I asked.

She shook her head. "Not that I can remember. He just walked into the house in the coolest sort of way and said that he particularly wanted a first edition of Coryat's travels, and that he'd heard I had one which I might be willing to part with. When I told him that I'd sold it, I don't think he believed me. Anyhow, he was horribly rude, and insisted on looking all through the shelves. There was no one there except Mary, so of course I couldn't stop him."

"I don't want to be inquisitive, Jean," I

said, "but have you any idea why this particular copy should be in such furious demand?"

She looked back at me quite frankly. "Not the slightest. If I had I should have told you at once."

"Then I'll bet a sovereign Peter's right," I exclaimed. "It's not the book they're after; it's that message of Henry Franklyn's to his son." I dragged out my note-case, and, extracting the title-page, spread it open on the table in front of her. "There you are," I said, "and if you can make any sense out of the blessed thing, you're better at riddles than I am. I've racked my brains over it till they're nearly addled."

Jean leaned forward and examined the letters eagerly.

"It's a funny-looking word, isn't it?" she said. "You'd never think it was worth forty pounds."

"It must be worth a lot more than that," I objected. "There's something pretty big at the back of this, or a man with a face like Skinner wouldn't be risking his hard-earned money." I pushed away the lukewarm cup of tea which I had forgotten to drink, and lighted a cigarette. "Who was Henry Franklyn?" I asked. "Have you ever heard of him?"

"Oh, yes," she said at once; "he was the last of the family who lived at the Abbey. It was burned down, you know, during the Civil War, and he was killed trying to defend it."

I sat up abruptly. "That's queer," I said. "I had a sort of feeling——" I paused. "Go on, Jean," I added; "I'm much too interested to interrupt you."

"I'm afraid I don't know any more," was her reply. "I can tell you where you might find out something, though. I remember Father saying that there was a little book in the British Museum all about the burning of the Abbey. It was written twenty or thirty years afterwards by an old clergyman at Orford."

"It might be worth while running up to Town to have a look at it," I said. "And if I do I'm not at all sure I won't call round on this chap, Inspector Jennifer, and tell him the whole story. I didn't say anything to him at the time about the cipher because in a way I felt that it wasn't altogether my own secret."

"It's much more your secret than mine," said Jean. "I shouldn't know anything about it if you hadn't taken the trouble to come and see me."

She picked up the title-page and again examined the inscription.

"You had better keep that and have a go at it to-night," I suggested. "I'm dining with Medlicot, so I shan't have any time for wrestling with ciphers." I glanced at my watch. "By the way, I ought to be getting back," I added. "He's promised to send a boat for me at seven."

Jean folded up the page carefully and slipped it into her bag.

"What are you doing to-morrow?" she asked.

"I thought of paying a visit to Eastport and buying some things I want for the ship. You're going to take Mary into Ispwich, aren't you?"

"Yes, but we don't start till eleven," she answered. "I shall come down and have a swim before breakfast, so you might look out for me if you happen to be awake."

"I'll make a special point of it," I assured her.

We went back together into the shop, and, having squared accounts with the obliging Mrs. Rudman, set off along the pleasant winding country road which connects Woodtown with the river.

It was a good two-mile walk, and on the way I took the opportunity of questioning Jean closely with regard to her neighbours. There was not much to be learned, however, for, with the exception of Medlicot and his queer retainers, the population of Bredbridge appeared to consist of one or two small farmers and a few local fishermen. That any of them could be in league with Mr. Skinner was a theory which she flatly refused to accept. They were, she declared, a simple, honest, and friendly lot of people, who had known her all her life, and from whom, ever since her father's financial trouble, she had met with nothing but kindness and sympathy.

She seemed, indeed, so positive on the point, that I made no further attempt to shake her conviction, though in my own heart I still clung to my belief that somewhere unpleasantly close at hand lay the centre of the mystery.

We said good-bye at the gate which led into the Abbey grounds, and, having crossed the bridge, I was in the act of passing "The Green Man" when I caught sight of Mr. Bassett, the landlord, sitting in his shirt-sleeves on a bench by the front door.

I pulled up in response to his greeting.

"Lost yer friend, ain't you?" he observed. "You'll be finding it a bit lonely now 'e's gone."

"Oh, I shall be all right," I said. "There's plenty of work to do on board." I took a seat beside him. "That reminds me," I continued. "I want to pick up one or two second-hand fittings, and I wondered if you could tell me of any place at Eastport where I'd be likely to get them."

"You try old Tom Underwood," was the answer. "He keeps a rare lot o' junk in that little shop of 'is down on the 'arbour." He paused. "I got a bit o' business to do in Eastport meself," he added. "If you'd like to make it to-morrow afternoon, I'll run you along there in the pony-trap."

"Thanks very much," I said. "What time will you be pushing off?"

"Mebbe about four," he replied. "No good

getting there too early; they don't open the pubs till 'alf-past five."

He rose to his feet as a farm labourer, in obvious quest of beer, came shambling hopefully round the corner, and, with a promise that I would be on hand at the appointed hour, I continued my way up the road and across the saltings to where I had left my dinghy.

The tide was out, but, at the cost of collecting a little mud on my hands and trousers, I succeeded in getting afloat. A few pulls brought me to *The Skylark*, and, knowing that Medlicot would be sending for me almost at once, I hurried down into the cabin to tidy myself up.

I was in the middle of this process, and was just wondering in my own mind how Captain Gull would carry off the situation, when the distant drone of a motor-engine suddenly reached my ears. By the time I arrived on deck the boat had already rounded the point. It was still about two hundred yards away, but even at that distance I had no difficulty in recognising the figure in the stern. It was not the skipper, but his hunchback son Ben, who, crouching there on the seat with his unkempt hair blowing in the wind, looked more like a gigantic ape than ever.

He brought his craft alongside neatly enough, however, and, switching off his engine, grabbed hold of the rail. Then, with a sudden contortion, he dived down inside his jersey and produced

a crumpled envelope, which he passed up to me. It contained a few lines written in a very neat and legible hand:

"Bredbridge Hall.

"My dear Cameron,—I hope you will not be alarmed at the appearance of your escort. It's only Ben, my skipper's son—a dumb, half-witted lad, but quite harmless and thoroughly competent with a boat. Though unable to speak himself, he can understand what you say to him.

"Yours sincerely,

"Horace Medlicot."

I crumpled up the paper into a ball and tossed it overboard.

"Well, I'm ready, Ben," I observed, "so we may as well get off at once."

As I spoke I dropped down into the bows, and a minute later we had swung round in a half-circle and were heading away down stream.

It was not more than a mile to the Hall, and, with the tide still ebbing, our little engine carried us along at a surprising speed. We were a silent party, for directly we had cleared *The Skylark* my companion subsided into his former seat, where, with his under-jaw stuck out and his head sunk between his huge shoulders, he offered little encouragement to any further attempt at single-handed conversation. On one

occasion I caught him glancing sideways at me in a furtive and half hostile fashion, but he looked away the moment he met my eye, and for the remainder of the journey continued to stare sullenly in front of him.

As we approached the landing-stage I caught sight of Medlicot sitting in an easy-chair on his verandah. He was wearing a suit of white duck, and looked exceedingly cool and comfortable as he rose to his feet and sauntered down the garden to meet me.

"So glad you were able to turn up," he said, shaking me heartily by the hand. "Ben gave you my note, I suppose?"

"Yes," I replied, "but you needn't have bothered to write. I'd heard all about Ben from Miss Franklyn."

"Well, I thought I'd better prepare you for him," he said, smiling. "He's rather a staggering object to spring on a stranger."

"I'd seen him before," I explained. "He was standing on the deck of your yacht the day we came up the river." I looked back over my shoulder to where *The Flying Cloud* was lying at her moorings in the setting sunlight.

"By Jove, I envy you that boat," I added. "She's exactly the sort I shall buy if I ever win the Calcutta Sweep."

"You must come along and have a sail in her one morning," was his reply. "I won't suggest taking you on board now, because Gull's got the engine down and she's in a bit

of a mess. Besides that, dinner ought to be just about ready."

He led the way towards the verandah, where, through an open French casement, I saw the gleam of flowers and silver.

"You may as well leave your hat here," he said, "then you can pick it up on your way out."

I followed his suggestion, and, stepping in through the window, found myself in a large, pleasantly shaped dining-room, lighted by an enormous bronze lamp which hung from the centre of the ceiling. There were some fine pictures on the walls, including several full-length portraits, one of which—a charming girl in eighteenth-century dress—bore a distinct resemblance to Jean.

I suppose Medlicot noticed that I was interested in it, for he came forward smilingly to where I was standing.

"You recognise the likeness, of course? That's the beautiful Georgina Franklyn—a direct ancestress of our little friend across the river."

"Are they all Franklyns?" I asked curiously.

"Every blessed one of them," he replied. "My cousin took them over when he bought the place. Of course, it's an infernal shame, considering that we're not even related to the family. They ought to belong to that poor child, and, as a matter of fact, I have left them to her in my will."

As he spoke the door opened, and a tight-lipped, middle-aged woman, with all the exterior marks of a respectable housekeeper, appeared on the threshold.

My companion nodded to her familiarly. "We're quite ready, Mrs. Chandler. You can serve dinner as soon as you like."

For a man who apparently spent most of his time grubbing up plants it must be admitted that Medlicot had a very sound taste in the way of food and wine. Seldom, indeed, have I enjoyed a more happily chosen or better cooked meal, while both the hock and the bottle of vintage Latour, which he uncorked with becoming reverence, would have done credit to the cellar of an expert. We were waited on by the silent and rather grim-looking housekeeper, and throughout the proceedings we chatted away, chiefly about boats and sailing, with all the easy friendliness of two people who have hit upon a mutual hobby.

It was not until dessert was finished, and we had adjourned to the verandah for our coffee and cigars, that the conversation drifted into a more personal channel.

"There's one special distinction you can lay claim to, Cameron," he said. "You are the first yachtsman who has ventured in here this summer. That infernal bar frightens away most of them, though of course it's a charming place to lie up in when you are once inside." He leaned back lazily in his chair and blew out a

cloud of smoke. "By the way, how long are you thinking of staying?"

"I haven't made any definite plans yet," I confessed. "It will take me a couple of days to get things straight, and after that I shall probably stop on for a bit and explore the neighbourhood."

"You had better let me put you up for the Eastport Yacht Club," he suggested. "They're an awfully good crowd of fellows, and they'll be delighted to make you an honorary member while you're here."

"It's very kind of you——" I began.

"Not at all," he interrupted. "I shall be looking in there to-morrow afternoon, and I'll mention your name to the secretary."

"Well, as it happens, I'm going to Eastport too," I said. "Why not dine with me at the club, and then we could come home together?"

For a second he hesitated. "That sounds rather attractive," he said slowly. "How would seven-thirty suit you? I'm not certain that I shall be free until then."

"Oh, that will be all right," I replied. "It will give me time to buy what I want and have a look round." I took a sip at my coffee. "I suppose it's perfectly safe leaving the yacht without anyone on board?" I continued. "Miss Franklyn tells me that everybody in Bredbridge is as honest as the day."

"I shouldn't like to go quite as far as that," he said, smiling. "Most of the villagers are

straight enough; all the same, we get some rather queer characters up here occasionally."

"What sort of characters?" I inquired.

He hesitated. "Well, of course, it's kept uncommonly dark; still, strictly between ourselves, there's a good deal more comes into this river than His Majesty's Customs would probably approve of."

"What—smuggling?" I said incredulously. "I thought we were much too respectable for that nowadays."

"Not down here," he remarked. "This was always a favourite place for dumping a cargo, and traditions of that sort die hard." He paused. "No one's likely to interfere with you, though," he added consolingly. "I don't suppose you carry round much in the way of valuables."

Since the one possession I had which might possibly answer to the description was safe in Jean's hands, I saw no reason for disputing his assumption.

"Only a toothbrush and a bottle of whisky," I replied carelessly. "I shouldn't grudge either of those—not to anyone who really wanted them."

We sat on talking in the gradually fading twilight, until, just as I was beginning to feel a trifle sleepy, the mellow voice of a distant church clock chimed out the hour of ten. As the last stroke died away I started to get up from my chair.

"But you're not thinking of going yet?" exclaimed Medlicot protestingly. "It's much too early to turn in, and, besides, if it won't bore you terribly, I should like to show you my collection. It's a kind of penance that all botanists insist on when they're lucky enough to entrap a guest."

He rose to his feet, and, realising that it would be impossible to refuse without hurting his feelings, I tossed away the stump of my cigar and followed him back into the house.

"This is what Mrs. Chandler calls the museum," he said, opening a door at the end of the dining-room. "It used to be poor Franklyn's library, and I fancy that having to turn out of here practically finished him."

He moved forward, and, striking a match, lighted a couple of tall lamps which stood on either side of the fireplace.

It was certainly an apartment which any man who was fond of books might break his heart at leaving. A long, cool, peaceful room, with broad windows and a big, open hearth, it was lined on three sides by oak shelves that reached up within a foot or two of the ceiling. Against the remaining wall stood a pair of large glass-fronted cabinets, each of them containing a number of drawers.

Walking across to these, Medlicot produced a bunch of keys.

"Take a pew and make yourself comfortable, Cameron," he said. "I don't suppose this

kind of thing is much in your line, but you may be interested to see one or two rather rare local plants which I've managed to pick up since I've been here."

I sat down on the comfortably padded sofa beside one of the lamps, and having opened the nearest cabinet and fumbled about for a few minutes, my host came towards me, carrying in his hands half a dozen square sheets of cardboard. He spread them out on a small table in front of us, and I saw that each contained a different specimen carefully secured by narrow strips of paper. In every case the name of the plant, and the place and date of its discovery, were written in below in red ink.

For perhaps a quarter of an hour I sat listening attentively to Medlicot while he pointed out to me the distinctive features of his various treasures. I am no botanist myself, but the marsh flowers of the east coast have always had a peculiar charm for me, and it was fascinating to hear all about their structure and habits from a man who evidently knew his subject inside out.

I was just examining the poisonous spikes of the Roman nettle, which, according to my companion, must originally have drifted ashore from some passing ship, when we were interrupted by a knock at the door. It proved to be Mrs. Chandler.

"I beg pardon, sir," she said, in a queer, toneless sort of voice, "but could you speak to Captain Gull?"

With a little gesture of annoyance Medlicot got up from his seat. "Will you excuse me a minute, Cameron?" he said. "I expect he wants to tell me about the engine."

I murmured some conventional reply, and, laying down the card which he was holding in his hand, he followed her out of the room and closed the door behind him.

For some while I sat idly on the sofa; then, becoming a trifle bored at doing nothing, I rose to my feet and sauntered over towards the cabinet. Two of the drawers were partly open, and, looking inside the nearest, I caught sight of a bulky packet in a brown paper cover—evidently a collection of cards similar to those on the table. Pasted across the top was a slip of paper containing a few words in Medlicot's neat handwriting:

Flora of the Haute-Pyrénées
Collected in the neighbourhood of St. Étienne de Luz.

The name seemed vaguely familiar, and for a moment or two I puzzled my brains as to where I had come across it. Then, as one often does in such cases, I suddenly remembered. It was the scene of an incident in one of Victor Hugo's novels—an ancient and half-ruinous mountain village on the borders of France and Spain.

I had moved on a few paces farther, and was examining the contents of the neighbouring

bookcase, when the door opened quietly and Medlicot re-entered the room.

"I'm sorry to have been so long," he observed. "You know what skippers are like when they once begin to talk."

I certainly knew what Captain Gull was like, but, not wishing to embarrass my host, I contented myself with a nod.

"Some mysterious trouble in connection with a big end," he continued. "I don't take much interest in engines myself, but I have to pretend to or it would hurt Gull's feelings." He paused. "How about a final whisky and soda outside?" he suggested. "I expect you've had enough botanising for to-night."

"I think I've had enough whisky too," I said. "If I drink any more I shall probably fall into the river."

"Oh, you needn't worry about that," he returned, smiling. "We can trust Ben to take you back and see you safely on board."

Exactly what time it was when we left the verandah and started to stroll down the garden I can't say, but the moon had already risen, and the crunch of our footsteps on the gravel path was the only sound that broke the silence.

As we approached the landing-stage, a dark heap that was crouching in the corner suddenly resolved itself into the figure of the hunchback. He looked grotesquely inhuman as he ambled out into the moonlight, and, drawing up the

dinghy alongside, proceeded to unhitch the painter.

"Well, good night, Medlicot," I said, "and thanks for a very pleasant evening. I shall look forward to seeing you to-morrow."

He nodded. "Seven-thirty at the club. By the way, if you care about a game of bridge I may be able to fix up a rubber after dinner. It will make us a bit late, but we can always get a taxi back."

"Sounds an excellent idea," I said cheerfully, and, shaking him by the hand, I stepped forward with some discretion and lowered myself into the boat.

So beautiful was the night that, sleepy as I was when we reached *The Skylark*, I felt no immediate inclination to turn in. For perhaps a quarter of an hour after Ben had left me I remained sitting on the counter, watching the moonbeams dancing in the water and thinking vaguely how charming it would be if I only had Jean there to keep me company. At last, after an exceptionally strenuous yawn, I summoned up sufficient energy to stumble down into the cabin, where I lighted a candle and began very drowsily to take off my things.

I was half undressed when I suddenly remembered that in the course of tidying the ship for our lunch-party I had picked up my pyjamas and stuffed them away in my bag. Unlike some hardier yachtsmen, I have a strong prejudice against sleeping in my clothes, so, carrying the

candle with me, I stepped through into the after-cabin.

The bag was in its usual place on the bunk, but the moment I opened it I realised that there was something wrong. Instead of being on top, the pyjamas were tucked away to one side, while an extra jersey which I had left folded up at the bottom was now staring me in the face.

With an abrupt movement I tipped up the bag and emptied out its contents. It was an unnecessary act, for I had already guessed the truth.

The only thing missing was my copy of Coryat.

CHAPTER X

"SKYLARK ahoy!"

It was Jean's voice calling, and, discarding my half-finished breakfast, I scrambled up hastily through the fo'c'sle hatch.

She was holding on to the dinghy, which was bobbing about alongside—a bare-armed, laughing figure in a little green bathing-cap.

"Hullo!" she demanded. "Is this what you call looking out for me?"

"I've been waiting hopefully ever since eight," I explained. "I'd only gone below to make some tea."

"Is it ready?" she asked. "I'd love a cup if you've got any to spare."

"Plenty," I assured her. "Hang on for a moment and I'll fetch it up."

I was back again almost at once, but by the time I reached the deck she had already climbed into the boat, and was sitting on the stern, dabbling her toes in the water. She looked like some charming, provocative drawing by a clever French artist.

"Here you are, Jean," I said. "I don't know if you'd like anything else, but one can't offer ham and eggs to a mermaid."

She took the cup, her grey eyes dancing merrily.

"Of course not," she said, "but that's no reason why you shouldn't give me a cigarette."

I produced my case, which was half full, and, placing one carefully between her upturned lips, leaned over and lighted a match.

"That's lovely," she said, drawing in a deep breath. "I feel like a Channel swimmer being attended to by her trainer."

"You don't suggest it to me," I said; "at least, not if one can judge by the photographs."

I seated myself on the rail, steadying the dinghy with my heel. "I've got a bit of interesting news for you," I added. "Last night, while I was dining with Medlicot, somebody came on board and pinched the book."

"What—the Coryat?" she exclaimed.

I nodded. "Yes," I said. "I am afraid he must have been a trifle annoyed when he found that the title-page was missing."

She sat for a moment staring at me in silence. "Do you think it was that little beast Skinner?"

"Skinner or one of his friends," I replied. "For all we know we may be up against a syndicate."

There was another pause, and then, taking a sip at her tea, Jean put down the cup.

"What are you going to do?" she asked quietly.

"What I suggested yesterday," I answered. "To-morrow morning I shall run up to Town and have a nice heart-to-heart talk with my friend Mr. Jennifer. When I'm in difficulties I always like to feel that there's a large, competent man with a square chin hanging about in the background."

"I hope he won't hang about too long," remarked Jean. "Whoever these people are, they're evidently in a hurry."

"I don't believe they can do much until they get hold of the title-page," I said. "You haven't left it lying about on your dressing-table or anywhere like that, have you?"

She shook her head. "I've rolled it up in my pyjamas and put it in the dirty-clothes' basket. No one's likely to look for it there."

"Not unless they're grossly inquisitive," I agreed. "By the way, I suppose you weren't able to make any sense out of it?"

"Absolutely nothing," was her reply. "It wasn't for want of trying, either. I sat up working at it in my bedroom until nearly one in the morning; in fact, I saw Ben bring you back to the ship. I can just get a glimpse of *The Skylark* from my window."

"If I'd only known that," I said, "I'd have waved you good night." I paused. "I haven't inquired after Mary yet," I added. "How is she to-day?"

Jean blew out another cloud of smoke, and dropped the remainder of her cigarette into the water.

"She's not very well, but I think she'll be able to manage the journey. There's a nurse coming over from Ipswich to help me look after her."

As she spoke she gave a little shiver.

"Look here, my child," I observed, "it's quite time you got a move on. You'll be frozen to death if you sit here any longer."

"I never catch cold," she retorted. "I'm frightfully tough—what there is of me." She finished her tea, and, passing me back the cup, jumped lightly to her feet. "Still, I suppose I ought to be getting back," she went on. "The car's coming for us at eleven, and I've a lot to do before we start."

"I'll row you ashore," I said, turning to unfasten the rope.

"No, I'd rather swim," was her reply. "It will warm me up and give me an appetite for

breakfast." She tucked in an escaped curl under her bathing-cap. "When am I going to see you again?"

"Not till to-morrow," I said. "Medlicot wants me to play bridge with him after dinner at the Eastport Club, and I don't suppose we shall be back before midnight. I'll look round in the morning on my way to the station, and then you can let me have that inscription."

"I'm not going to leave it in the house after what happened last night," she announced. "I shall take it with me to Ipswich." She held out her hand. "Good-bye, Jim, and thank you for my tea and cigarette."

She looked so bewitching, standing there in the sunshine like a little slender naiad, that it was all I could do not to lean over and pick her up in my arms.

"Good-bye, Jean," I said, kissing the tips of her fingers. "Mind the weeds, if there are any; I should hate you to get drowned."

"It would be rather a pity, wouldn't it?" she laughed. "I shouldn't have the fun of seeing you kick Mr. Skinner."

She steadied herself for a moment against the side of the ship; then, springing head first into the water, she came up about a dozen yards away and struck out vigorously for the opposite bank.

I remained on deck until I had seen her safely ashore, when, in a somewhat mixed frame of

mind, I made my way back to my unfinished breakfast. Lightly as I had spoken about the disappearance of the book, I was, in reality, far more worried and mystified than I cared to admit. There were things in connection with the affair which I found it extremely difficult to account for—things which altogether declined to fit in with the ingenious theory that Peter and I had so hopefully constructed.

If the thief's object had been the recovery of that unintelligible message of Henry Franklyn's, he would surely have noticed at once that the page on which it was written had been torn out. In that case, why had he been so foolish as to take away the book? In its present mutilated state it would be of no value to him, while its loss, which I was bound to discover in a few hours, would immediately warn me of my danger and put me on my guard against any further attempt.

Had we, I wondered, been a little too hasty in attaching so much importance to the cipher? Was it possible, after all, that the book itself was the real attraction, and that in allowing it to slip through my fingers I had been guilty of a stupid and perhaps irretrievable blunder?

The longer I thought it over the more doubtful I felt, and the keener became my desire for Jennifer's advice and assistance. If I had followed my natural impulse, I should indeed have started off for Town straight away, but, on the

other hand, there were *The Skylark's* damages clamouring to be attended to, and my engagement to dine and play bridge at the Eastport Club.

It was the latter consideration which chiefly influenced my decision. After Medlicot's kindness in putting me up as a member, the least I could do in return, was certainly to keep my appointment; besides, apart altogether from questions of courtesy, I was distinctly anxious for another chat with him before consulting the inspector.

As far as I could see, he was much the most likely person in the neighbourhood to be able to help us. In addition to being a man of observation and intelligence, he evidently had a soft corner in his heart for Jean, and, what was more to the point, he appeared to know a good deal about the family history of the Franklyns. On the previous evening, not wishing to arouse his curiosity, I had purposely refrained from asking too many questions, but, now that events had begun to move in such dramatic fashion, I felt that if there was any information he could give us, the sooner I got it out of him the better.

At this point in my reflections it occurred to me that, having already thrashed out the whole situation the night before, I should be more profitably employed in getting on with my work. I therefore washed up and put away the breakfast-things, and, having selected such

tools as I thought I should need, once more ascended to the deck, where traces of our recent encounter with the sand were still painfully in evidence.

Two or three casualties, including a badly strained bowsprit, it was impossible to tackle until I had secured the necessary gear. Outside these, however, there was plenty of employment for a willing worker—especially for one whose amateur status as a ship's carpenter has never yet been seriously questioned.

Only knocking off for an occasional cigarette, I toiled away steadily and methodically until nearly two o'clock, when, with barked knuckles and an aching back, I paused to survey my achievements. Considering that I had been working single-handed, they struck me as being distinctly creditable. Anyhow, they were the best that I could do in the circumstances, and, comforted by the knowledge that at a pinch I could put to sea without serious misgiving, I returned to the cabin for a little rest and refreshment before setting out on my expedition with Mr. Bassett.

A good wash, followed by some bread and cheese and beer, worked wonders, and about twenty minutes before the appointed time, having arrayed myself in my only respectable suit, I got into the dinghy and sculled leisurely ashore.

After the warning which Medlicot had given me the night before, I was not altogether happy

about leaving the boat. There being no apparent alternative, however, I hauled it well up amongst the reeds, and, hoping that it would escape the eye of any predatory stranger, set off across the saltings.

When I arrived at "The Green Man," I found Mr. Bassett standing in the doorway. He welcomed me warmly, and, as we exchanged greetings, a small boy, leading a diminutive pony and trap, emerged from a neighbouring shed.

I inspected the animal with some doubtfulness.

"Shan't we be a bit too heavy for him?" I suggested.

The landlord grinned broadly. "You 'op in, sir, you 'op in, and 'old on tight. He don't like to be kept waitin', not when 'e's once in the shafts."

Encouraged by his reply, I did as I was ordered, and, taking his place beside me, Mr. Bassett gathered up the reins.

"Leggo," he ordered.

The boy stood aside, and, with a sudden violent jerk that nearly tumbled me from my seat, we shot out into the roadway.

"Everyone 'as 'is own 'obby," observed my companion, as he steered us skilfully round the corner. "Some like dawgs, some like chickens, some like women—mine's a bit o' blood." He drew the lash of his whip caressingly across the pony's back, causing that

mettlesome thoroughbred to bound forward like a startled chamois. "You can't beat blood," he added, "not if you want a really sound 'obby."

"I daresay you're right," I agreed. "I've never thirsted for it myself, but then, you see, I'm already fixed up." I pointed away across the saltings in the direction of *The Skylark*.

"Well, a ship ain't so bad," admitted Mr. Bassett a little grudgingly. "You can 'ave a lot o' fun with a ship, you can, provided you got a strong stomick."

"Talking of ships," I remarked, "I wonder if it's safe to leave one's dinghy kicking about on the bank? Do you think anyone's likely to come along and walk off with her?"

"Walk off with 'er!" repeated the landlord indignantly. "Why, whatever put an idea like that into your 'ead? There ain't an honester place than Bredbridge not in the whole o' Suffolk."

"One hears different stories," I said. "Somebody told me yesterday that there was more smuggling in this river than anywhere else on the coast."

My companion stared at me for a moment, and then broke into a hoarse chuckle.

"Somebody's been pulling your leg, mister. I won't go so far as to say that none o' the lads don't bring back a plug o' baccy now and then

when they come foreign—'twouldn't be 'uman nature, seein' the price they got to pay for it 'ere. As for there bein' a reg'lar trade in that sorter thing, why, 'tis all poppycock. Next time you sees the party you mention you give 'im Sam Bassett's compliments and tell 'im 'e's a liar."

He repeated the last word, with the addition of a strengthening adjective, and for a few minutes we rattled along in silence. According to the best authorities, there is an explanation for everything, but I must confess that this flat contradiction of Medlicot's statement had left me rather at a loss. If smuggling were being carried out on any extensive scale, the landlord of the local inn was surely the man who would be most likely to get wind of it. It was possible, of course, that Bassett himself might be mixed up in the business, but from what I had seen of him he certainly didn't suggest that type of individual, while the half-contemptuous derision with which he had dismissed my suggestion had apparently been perfectly sincere.

On the other hand, why the dickens should Medlicot have made such a charge if there were no foundation for it? He was much too good natured a man to slander his neighbours gratuitously, and, besides, his whole manner had conveyed the impression that in speaking as he did he was merely endeavouring to give me a friendly warning.

The only solution I could think of was that he must have overheard some vague gossip which he had treated more seriously than it deserved. In that case, I was thankful that I had had the sense not to mention his name. Such an accusation would no doubt be bitterly resented, and I had no wish to return his hospitality by embroiling him with the entire district.

An abrupt ending to a rather awkward pause was brought about by the timely intervention of a cock pheasant. It emerged from the hedge like an accidentally touched-off rocket, and, as though accepting the challenge, our "bit o' blood" projected himself into the air in a spirited effort to rival its achievement.

By the time he was again under control the subject of our discussion had faded into the background. With the defensive air of an enthusiast, Mr. Bassett was explaining to me that all really well-bred animals suffered from these occasional fits of playfulness, and for the remainder of the journey we chatted away amicably about "'osses" and their peculiarities without further reference to my unfortunate disclosure.

Entering the outskirts of Eastport, we bumped along merrily through its narrow cobbled streets, and drew up at the Red Lion, an ancient and rather weather-beaten hostelry on the poorer side of the harbour. My companion was evidently a familiar figure, for, as soon as he came

to a halt, a nondescript gentleman in gaiters, who was lounging about the doorway of an adjoining yard, shuffled forward with a grin of recognition.

"Guv'nor in, Joe?" inquired Mr. Bassett.

"Well, 'e ain't far off," was the answer. "Just popped over the road to see wot won the four-thirty. 'E'll be 'ere by the time we open."

"You can take the pony then," said Mr. Bassett. "Give 'im a feed, and tell the guv'nor that me and this gen'leman will be back about a quarter to six.

"'Tis only round the corner—Tom Underwood's place," he explained, as we stepped down on to the pavement. "I'll leave you with 'im, and when I get through my bit o' business, I'll come along and wait for you 'ere. It's a nice 'ouse, and you needn't be frightened of the whisky."

Cheered by this assurance, I accompanied him down a narrow passage into a quiet back street where we came out exactly opposite a tumble-down wooden store, the windows of which were crammed with every conceivable kind of marine lumber. On a chair in the doorway sat the proprietor, a gnarled old salt in a blue jersey, with a face that looked as if it had been hacked out of mahogany by a rather incompetent sculptor.

Mr. Bassett made the necessary introductions.

"Wot cheer, Tom," he observed. "This

'ere's Mr. Cameron, and 'e'd like to 'ave a look through some o' your junk."

"'E's welcome," said Mr. Underwood, removing his pipe.

"And seein' as 'e's a friend o' mine," pursued my companion, "don't you go chargin' 'im no fancy prices. I shan't be long," he added, turning to me, "but if you get there first you walk into the saloon bar and introjooce yourself to the guv'nor. Phil's 'is name—Phil Roper. Tell 'im you're a pal o' Sam Bassett's, and you'll think you're in your own 'ome."

He stumped off up the street, and, following Mr. Underwood into the gloomy recesses of his shop, I produced my list of requirements, which I had jotted down before starting. They were an assorted lot, but by dint of a little patience and a good deal of research work we eventually succeeded in unearthing the entire collection. These the old man fastened up neatly for me in a piece of stout sailcloth, and, shouldering my bundle, like the traveller for Philadelphia, I retraced my steps to the "Red Lion."

Just as I arrived, the ostler, who had apparently disposed of our "bit o' blood," came sauntering out again through the stable entrance. I handed him my purchases with a request that he would put them in the trap, and then, following Mr. Bassett's instructions, pushed open the door of the saloon bar

I found myself in a small, low-ceilinged apartment, hung round with pictures of deceased racehorses. Two or three early arrivals were already being served by a fashionably cropped young lady, but of Mr. Bassett or the landlord there was as yet no sign.

Ordering a whisky and soda, I carried it across to a seat in one of the bow windows. From here I was not only able to look out into the street, but could also command a sideways glimpse of the harbour, and, with this double facility for beguiling the time, I settled down to await my fellow-traveller.

I must have been sitting there for about five minutes, taking an occasional sip at my drink and gazing idly through the old-fashioned diamond panes, when with staggering unexpectedness the thing happened. From the door of a shabby-looking house on the opposite side of the road two men stepped out on to the pavement. They were not more than ten or twelve yards away from me, and the sun was shining full upon their faces. One was Medlicot, and the other—of all people in the world—was my friend Mr. Skinner.

CHAPTER XI

FOR a moment I could hardly believe my eyes. Every muscle in my body became stiff and tense, and I sat staring at them like a man in a trance.

It was a merciful sort of paralysis, for otherwise, in the first rush of my astonishment, I should probably have done something idiotic; as it was, before I could make a fool of myself the opportunity had passed. With a sharp glance up and down the street and a curt nod to his companion, Medlicot set off in the direction of the harbour. In another few seconds he had disappeared round the corner, and, breaking the spell which had held me stupefied, I jumped swiftly to my feet.

At the same instant a door on my right was flung open and Mr. Bassett strode into the bar.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, bearing down upon me with an expansive smile, "so you've got 'ere first, eh?" He deposited a paper parcel on the table, and, removing his hat, mopped the perspiration from his forehead. "Phil will be along in a moment," he added. "I've just been speakin' to 'im round at the back, I 'ave."

I glanced across the street at Skinner, who was still standing on the pavement.

"You know most of the people about here," I said. "Who's that seedy-looking merchant

over the way? I've a kind of idea I've seen him before."

Mr. Bassett peered through the window, and I saw a sudden change come into his face.

"Party o' the name o' Stokes," he replied. "Used to be 'ead clerk to old Turnbull, the lawyer." He lowered his voice. "Got the sack for pinchin' the petty cash or something of the sort, and been 'anging around the place since makin' a livin' as best 'e can."

"Do you know him to speak to?" I inquired.

"Not me," was the answer. I like folk what's a bit more up and down perpendic'lar."

I was about to ask some further questions when we were interrupted by the arrival on the scene of our host—a breezy, red-faced publican with a large rose in his button-hole. He came over to where we were standing, and, informing me that any friend of Sam Bassett's was a friend of his, hospitably insisted that we should adjourn to his private sanctum behind the bar.

Loath as I was to leave the window, I felt it wiser to accept his invitation. By sheer luck I had apparently stumbled upon an immensely significant discovery, but before following up my good fortune I wanted time to think. If I betrayed myself now, I should be giving away all the advantage of my position, and, since I had already acquired enough information to run Mr. "Skinner" to earth

whenever I needed him, there seemed to be no point in taking any hasty or unnecessary action.

Such being the case, I accordingly followed the others, and, passing through a frosted glass door, entered a small and exceedingly stuffy room, the principal contents of which were a roll-top desk and a large horsehair sofa.

Observing that the occasion was one which required celebrating, Mr. Roper at once stepped across to a corner cupboard, which he unlocked with a key attached to his watch-chain. From inside he produced a box of Henry Clays and a bottle of thirty-year-old liqueur whisky, and, flanked by those aids to eloquence, we settled down for a friendly chat.

At any other time I should have enjoyed myself well enough, but, after what I had just witnessed, I found it a little difficult to concentrate my attention. The fact that Medlicot was acquainted with Skinner, and that the two of them were meeting furtively in Eastport, kept dinning itself into my mind like the insistent clang of a bell. In these circumstances, even such subjects as the weather and the local horse-show struck me as being comparatively unimportant, though for about half an hour I did my best to maintain an air of intelligent interest.

At last, owing to a summons from the bar, Mr. Roper was compelled to desert our company. He pressed us both to await his return, but,

explaining regretfully that I had promised to spend the evening with a friend, I took the opportunity of making my escape.

It was with a sense of vast relief that I got out into the fresh air. There was still a full hour before I was due at the club, and, in view of the situation which awaited me there, sixty minutes' quiet meditation seemed exactly the prescription of which I was most urgently in need.

Being anxious to avoid any risk of a chance meeting with Medlicot, I struck off up the street in the direction from which we had driven in. I had spent a day ashore at Eastport during the previous summer, and I was well enough acquainted with the place to know that if I kept working round to the right I must eventually come out on the farther side of the harbour where the Yacht Club was situated.

My opinion of myself, now that I had recovered from my first surprise, was distinctly the reverse of flattering. As a detective it seemed to me that I was a complete wash-out. Despite the fact that I had had plenty of opportunity for studying Medlicot, the idea of his being, so to speak, the arch villain of the piece had never even entered my head. If, as now appeared probable, he was really the unknown principal for whom Skinner had been acting, the ease with which I had allowed myself to be fooled must have filled him with amused astonishment.

That he had been playing with me from the very beginning I no longer felt the least doubt. His prompt appearance on the morning after our arrival, the interest that he had shown in *The Skylark*, and the effective way in which he had taken me under his charge—all these things (though I had accepted them blindly enough at the time) now came back to my mind with a new and sinister significance.

Other and more recent recollections only helped to deepen my mistrust. That yarn, for instance, about the amount of smuggling which went on in the river, wasn't it exactly the sort of lie that he would have been most likely to invent? Assuming he knew that the book was going to be stolen that evening, what more cunning method could he have adopted for putting me on a false scent than to drop this apparently friendly hint with regard to the dishonest practices of some of the local fishermen?

Then there was the question of Gull—Gull and that hunchbacked son of his. Why on earth should a man who evidently spent a good deal of his time afloat saddle himself with such an unprepossessing crew? They might be efficient enough at their work, but, judging by what I had seen of them, anything less attractive in the way of shipmates it would be almost impossible to imagine. The theory, put forward by Jean, that this was merely another instance of our friend's charity and goodness of heart,

seemed to me, in my present state of mind, a little inconsistent with the facts. If it were true, he would hardly be carrying on a plot with a rogue like Skinner, and yet, unless appearances were deceitful, that was the precise occupation in which I had just seen him engaged.

As to my immediate course of action, one thing stood out perfectly plain. Until I had seen the inspector, and had a chance of obtaining his advice, I must at all costs keep up the pretence of being perfectly friendly with Medlicot. Whatever else he might be, he was certainly no fool, and although for the moment he probably regarded me with contempt, the slightest alteration in my manner would be more than sufficient to put him on his guard.

It was this thought that was still uppermost in my mind when, at five minutes before the appointed hour, I turned in through the neatly kept garden of the Yacht Club and marched up to the front door.

There were a number of members sitting about in the big lounge hall, and almost the first person I saw was Medlicot himself. He was lying back in an armchair, looking very much at his ease, and chatting away amicably to a stout, bald-headed gentleman who, to judge by his costume, had evidently been playing golf.

"Why, here's the very man!" he exclaimed, jumping up to meet me. "Come along,

Cameron, and let me introduce you to Edgeworth—our secretary. He only turned up a minute or two ago, and I was just telling him about you, and asking him to put your name down for temporary membership."

I shook hands with his companion, who announced that he would be delighted to act as my sponsor, and, this simple formality being apparently all that was required, seated myself in the chair which Medlicot had pulled forward.

"I've managed to arrange a four for bridge," he continued. "Edgeworth is staying on, and a doctor here—a fellow called Fraser, who is a first-class player—has promised to come back after dinner. We ought to have quite a good game."

"I hope you'll give me the pleasure of being my guest," I said, turning to the secretary. "I have been overwhelmed with hospitality ever since I arrived at Bredbridge, and so far I haven't had a single opportunity of returning it."

"Certainly, sir, certainly," replied Mr. Edgeworth promptly. "I never refuse an invitation to dinner—at least, not while asparagus is in season."

We both laughed, and, considerably relieved at the prospect of escaping a prolonged *tête-à-tête* with Medlicot, I suggested that in order to avoid any risk of being disappointed we had better make an early move in the direction of the dining-room.

Seated at a corner table in a bow window looking out over the harbour, I felt as if I were taking part in some scene on the stage. Heaven knows what may have been passing through Medlicot's mind, but, as far as his outward manner went, a more agreeable companion it would have been difficult to find. He and the stout secretary were evidently on the friendliest terms with each other, and, although I kept on reminding myself that this pleasant and popular gentleman was in all probability an unmitigated scoundrel, I was soon joking and chatting away to the pair of them as naturally as though no such person as Mr. Skinner had ever entered my existence.

Our fourth player, Dr. Fraser, who turned up just when we had reached the stage of coffee and liqueurs, proved to be a quiet, middle-aged Scotsman with a dry sense of humour. He seemed fully as cordial in his relations with Medlicot as Edgeworth himself—a fact which interested me considerably, if only for the reason that, judging from first impressions, he appeared to be a far shrewder and more intelligent man.

No one displayed any particular haste to begin bridge, and it must have been close on nine o'clock when we eventually adjourned to the card-room. We played about half a dozen rubbers, in the course of which, at a shilling a hundred, I succeeded in amassing the magnificent sum of thirteen and sixpence, and then the

doctor, who had an early appointment next morning, declared that it was time for him to be making his way home.

"We've broken up a bit earlier than I expected," observed Medlicot, when he had taken his departure. "I told our man to call for us at half-past eleven, so he won't be here for another twenty minutes yet."

"You had better come along to my room," suggested Edgeworth. "The bar's shut now, but I always keep a drop of something in reserve, just in case of any sudden emergency."

He shepherded us through the hall into a tiny but comfortably furnished office, where we sat talking and yarning over a final drink until a loud thud at the front door announced the arrival of our taxi.

Not being too sure as to how I should play my part, I had been looking forward to this drive back with considerable uneasiness. So far I seemed to have managed pretty successfully, but to keep up the same air of friendly confidence with Medlicot when we were alone was an altogether different and more delicate proposition.

From the moment we started, however, he began to discuss the club and its members in such a lively and amusing fashion that, apart from throwing in an occasional remark, I had nothing to do except to sit still and listen. I must certainly have found his conversation worth listening to, for I remember being taken

altogether by surprise when, after what seemed an incredibly short journey, we pulled up with a jerk in front of a pair of massive iron gates.

"Don't you move," he said, throwing open the door of the taxi. "I'll tell the man to drive on and drop you at your corner."

"I'm in no hurry," I protested. "Why not let him run you up to the house?"

He shook his head. "This will do me all right. I can slip in by the side entrance and cut across the garden." He stepped out, closing the door behind him. "Well, good night, Cameron," he added. "I'll probably see you to-morrow, and then we'll try and fix up arrangements for another game. You won't be allowed to go back to London with the whole of that thirteen and sixpence."

Laughing at his own joke, he turned away to give his instructions to the driver, and, before there was a chance of getting out any suitable reply, we had lurched on again and left him standing in the roadway.

As I sat there alone, with the gleam of our headlamps lighting up the hedges, I became conscious for the first time of a faint, uncomfortable doubt. Was it possible, after all, that I had jumped to too hasty a conclusion? Wasn't it just on the cards that in the sudden shock of my discovery I might have conjured up a more damning case against Medlicot than the evidence really justified?

If he were the scoundrel I pictured him to be, how did it come about that such decent chaps as Edgeworth and Fraser were apparently his intimate friends? Men in a club are not slow, as a rule, in criticising each other, and, of all people, the secretary would surely have the best opportunity for knowing the general opinion with regard to a fellow-member's character and reputation.

Supposing, in spite of what I believed to the contrary, that Skinner himself was the originator of the whole business? In that case mightn't he have invented some plausible story by means of which he had managed to scrape acquaintance with Medlicot? As the present owner of Bredbridge Hall the latter was quite likely to be more or less concerned in the mystery, and it might well be that, without realising the truth, he was allowing himself to be made use of by a daring and unscrupulous rascal.

It was a conceivable theory, anyhow, and I was on the point of examining it a little more closely when we suddenly drew up at the entrance to the path which ran down to the hard.

"Just got 'ere in time, sir," observed the driver, as I clambered out. "Shouldn't be surprised if we had some rain before long."

He pointed to a jagged bank of black cloud which was already creeping slowly across the face of the moon.

"Well, I hope it won't start before I get on board," I said. "By the way, how much do I owe you?"

He shook his head. "There's nothing to pay, sir. Mr. Medlicot ordered the taxi, and it will be put down to his account."

"Do you often drive him over?" I inquired.

"Several times a week when he's here, sir, and always pleased to do it. 'E's a real gentleman, is Mr. Medlicot—one o' the sort it's a fair treat to work for."

There was no mistaking the genuineness of the testimonial, and, more undecided than ever as to what to believe with regard to my remarkable neighbour, I wished his admirer good night and started off across the saltings.

Owing to the darkness, I found considerable difficulty in keeping to the path, a false step from which would probably have landed me knee deep in some muddy and treacherous pool. As I was wearing my only pair of respectable trousers I therefore advanced with caution, and I was not a little relieved when I at last arrived safely at the spot where I had hidden my dinghy.

There she was all right, exactly as Mr. Bassett had predicted. Dragging her out from amongst the reeds, I hauled her down the shingle, and a few minutes later, with my coat-collar turned up and the first big drops dappling the surface of

the water, I was sculling vigorously for the friendly shelter of *The Skylark*.

Just as I got on board, the rain began to come down in earnest. It was that vicious, business like rain which wets one through immediately, so, without wasting any unnecessary time, I slid back the hatch and scrambled down the companion.

My first care was naturally to shut out the deluge; then, being unable to see what I was doing, I stepped through into the cabin in order to light the lamp.

I was standing there, fumbling in my pocket for a box of matches, when I suddenly heard a faint movement. At the same instant something clutched hold of my ankles, and, taken utterly by surprise, I pitched forward into the darkness. The only other thing I remember was a violent and sickening pain, as my forehead came with a stunning crash against the sharp edge of the table.

. . . . . .

"Jim—Jim dear. It's I—Jean. Speak to me! Tell me you know me!"

I stared up into the grey eyes that were gazing down into mine, and then, very feebly, I lifted my hand to my head. My fingers touched something cold and damp.

"It's only a handkerchief I've tied round, Jim. I didn't know what else to do. I found you

lying on the floor with your forehead all cut and bleeding."

She picked up a tumbler from beside her, and, slipping her arm round me, held it to my lips. I would never have believed that plain water could taste so delicious.

"Can you remember how it happened?" she whispered.

With something of an effort I managed to find my voice. "I'll tell you in a moment," I said a little shakily, "but, first of all, how did you get here?"

"I was woken up by the rain," she answered. "It was blowing right into my room, so I jumped out of bed to shut the window. Then I noticed that there was a light in your cabin. While I was looking at it, and wondering what you were doing, I suddenly caught sight of a boat which seemed to have come out from the bank. It made straight for *The Skylark*, and pulled up alongside. At first I thought it must be you, but a minute later the light went out, and I saw two men moving about on deck."

"You *saw* them?" I exclaimed. "You mean you recognised them?"

She shook her head. "It was too dark and too far off. I could only see that they got into the boat and rowed away down the river."

There was a pause. "Go on, Jean," I said.

"I knew that something was wrong at once. I felt sure that they must be the same people who had stolen the book, so I put on my clothes as quickly as I could and ran down to the shed opposite, where there's an old punt belonging to one of the fishermen. She's horribly heavy and clumsy, but I got her afloat at last and paddled her across. It was quite dark in the cabin, and when I struck a match, there you were, lying on the floor." Her voice quivered. "Oh, Jim, for one dreadful minute I thought you were dead."

I slipped my hand into hers and squeezed it comfortingly.

"It takes a lot to kill a Scotsman," I said. "What I don't understand at present is how I come to be on this bunk."

"I put you there," said Jean. "It wasn't easy, but I pulled you across and lifted you up a bit at a time." She changed her position slightly as she spoke, and I saw that the front of her jersey was smeared with blood. "What happened?" she repeated. "Who were those men, and——"

"You can't stay kneeling like that, Jean," I broke in. "Get up and sit in the bunk and I'll try to tell you all about it."

I moved back a little, and, still holding my hand tightly in hers, she seated herself beside me.

I was half dazed even now, and my head was aching horribly, but, with a spirited endeavour

to disregard these obstacles, I began in a somewhat stumbling fashion to relate the story of my visit to Eastport. She evidently realised the effort it was costing me, for, although I could see that she was listening to every word with breathless interest, she made no attempt to interrupt or to ask questions until I had come to an end.

"These two beauties must have been waiting for me in the cabin," I concluded, "and when they grabbed me by the ankles I knocked myself silly against the edge of the table. After that I suppose they lit the lamp and went through my pockets to see if they could find the missing page." I paused to take another gulp from the tumbler, which I had placed on the shelf beside my bunk. "The question is," I added, "who the devil were they, and had they anything to do with Medlicot and Skinner?"

Gently withdrawing her hand, Jean leaned over me and rearranged the pillow.

"I don't think we need worry about that now," she said. "I want you to go to sleep, Jim. You'll be much better when you wake up, and then we can talk it over quietly and comfortably."

"But I'm going to London in the morning," I protested.

"That will be all right," she replied. "There's no train until nine o'clock, and I shall be back here by half-past six to get you your breakfast."

"Breakfast!" I repeated vaguely.

She nodded. "Yes," she said, "you've got to have some breakfast, and I'm sure you won't feel like turning out and making it yourself. I should stop here and look after you, only I'm afraid you'd try and talk if I did. No, please don't argue, Jim," she added, as I feebly attempted to protest. "You'll only make your head worse, and then you won't be able to sleep. Just lie still like a good boy and shut your eyes. You'll feel heaps better for a night's rest, and to-morrow morning we can go into the whole thing from beginning to end."

Being in no condition to continue the discussion, I submitted meekly to her instructions. Through my half-closed eyes I watched her moving noiselessly about the cabin, re-filling the tumbler and picking up some broken pieces of glass which were lying on the floor. At last, very quietly, she stole back to the head of the bunk, and, without speaking, turned down the light. From the faint sound of her breathing I was conscious that she was still standing beside me. Then, almost as though it were in a dream, I felt a little soft kiss upon my cheek and the next moment I was alone in the darkness.

CHAPTER XII

I GOT out of the taxi which had brought me from Liverpool Street, and, paying off the driver, mounted the steps of 26 Campden Hill Terrace. It was an unobtrusive, two-storey house, with a brightly polished brass knocker, and white lace curtains in the front window.

After a brief interval, my ring was answered by a soberly dressed, middle-aged woman, who stood in the doorway glancing at me inquiringly.

"Good morning," I said. "Is this where Inspector Jennifer lives?"

"Are you Mr. Cameron?" she demanded.

I nodded. "Yes," I said. "I sent him a wire from Suffolk this morning to say I'd call on him about mid-day."

"That's right, sir," she replied, moving to one side. "My brother had to go out, but I am expecting him back any minute now. He told me to ask you if you would be good enough to wait."

She opened a door on the left-hand side of the passage, and ushered me into a well-furnished room, where everything was arranged with meticulous neatness.

"Perhaps you'll take a seat, sir," she suggested. "I am sure he won't keep you long."

She went out, closing the door behind her,

and, having deposited my hat on Mr. Jennifer's sofa, I stood there taking stock of my surroundings.

With the possible exception of a private ward at St. Thomas's Hospital, which I once occupied for a fortnight, it was certainly the tidiest room I had ever been in. From the properly spaced silver cups on the sideboard to the stiffly arranged volumes in the bookshelf, everything appeared to be in precisely its correct position—an impression which was heightened by a life-sized coloured photograph of the inspector himself, which seemed to be keeping a stern and watchful eye upon this well-ordered symmetry.

Seating myself at the table in the centre, I pulled out my pocket-book. During the course of a somewhat prolonged breakfast, Jean and I had discussed the situation from every conceivable point of view, and on the way up in the train I had spent my time making a note of the principal points, so that I could tell my story as clearly and concisely as possible.

I was reading them over when I heard a heavy tread coming up the steps, followed almost immediately by a loud bang, and a brief colloquy in the passage outside. A moment later the burly figure of the inspector appeared in the doorway.

"Ah, Mr. Cameron," he remarked, coming forward and shaking me by the hand. "Very pleased to see you again. I must apologise for being out when you arrived, but your wire

only turned up at ten o'clock, and unfortunately I had already made an appointment."

"There's nothing to apologise for," I assured him. "Your sister did the honours splendidly, and I've been sitting here, admiring your trophies."

"You mean the cups," he said, smiling. "Oh, they're just one or two prizes I picked up as a youngster, when I used to go in for boxing." His eyes travelled to the piece of sticking-plaster which decorated my forehead. "By the way," he added, with a twinkle, "*you* seem to have been in the wars."

I felt the bump gingerly with my fingers.

"That's more or less what I've come here to talk about," I said. "I don't know whether you're busy——"

"I've the whole afternoon to spare," he interrupted. "Sit down, Mr. Cameron, sit down and make yourself comfortable." He pulled up another chair and seated himself alongside me.

"Were you surprised to get my wire?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Not in the least. After what happened the other night, I felt sure that I should see you again before very long."

"Well, you were right," I replied, "but it was a close thing, all the same. If the cabin table had been a bit sharper——" I paused. "However, I'm beginning at the wrong end,"

I added. "Before I go any farther I want to make a confession."

He nodded. "Something to do with our last meeting, eh? There was just a little bit of your story which you thought it wiser to keep to yourself."

"Yes," I said, "and, if it's any satisfaction to you, I've been sorry about it ever since."

I dived into an inside pocket and produced the folded title-page, which Jean had given me back before I left Bredbridge.

"This is what I didn't show you," I said. "It's the title-page of the book that Skinner was so anxious to buy from me. Those letters on the back were probably written by Henry Franklyn, the man it originally belonged to. Unless I'm mistaken, they're responsible for the whole business."

I handed him the paper, and for several seconds he examined it in silence.

"What do you make of it?" I asked.

He looked up. "Very interesting," he said drily, "but I think I'd rather hear a little more before I begin guessing."

"You'll have to be patient," I warned him. "It's a hell of a long yarn."

"Never mind about that," he replied. "Just go ahead and tell it me in your own way. I can stop you if there's anything I want to ask."

He helped himself to a sheet of paper from a writing-case in the centre of the table, and, without

waiting for any further encouragement, I plunged straight away into the opening of my story.

I told him everything—how we had discovered the inscription, how I had visited Mr. Wiltshire the next day, and how, on the strength of what I had learned from him, Peter and I had started off for Bredbridge with the idea of looking into the matter on the spot.

I drew a picture of our dramatic meeting with Jean on the edge of the Blacksand, and then, step by step, with the help of the notes that I had jotted down in the train, I proceeded to describe all the various events which had led up to my temporary disfigurement.

Making occasional memoranda, and now and then throwing in a curt question, the inspector listened to my recital with profound attention. Once or twice I saw the corners of his grim mouth twitch humorously, but otherwise I could get no indication from his face as to the impression that I was producing. Even when I had finished, he sat for a moment stroking his grizzled, stubbly moustache and eyeing me in reflective silence.

"I know I've made a fearful hash of it," I admitted frankly. "I ought to have told you about that cipher at once, but, you see, it was my friend's secret as much as mine, and until I had consulted him I didn't like to give it away."

"That's all right, Mr. Cameron," he replied.

"There's no particular harm done, except that I might have been able to save you running your head into the table. He paused. "As for making a hash of it, I think that, considering it's your first attempt at anything of the kind, you've got through uncommonly well."

"I've learned one thing, anyhow," I said. "Whatever's at the back of this damned business, it's no job for a single-handed amateur." I lighted a well-earned cigarette and pulled my chair a little closer. "Look here, Mr. Jennifer," I added. "I don't want to go to the police, and neither does Miss Franklyn. At the same time, we've got to do something. Will you accept a commission from me and take up the case?"

He nodded. "To be perfectly honest," he said, "that's exactly what I've been hoping you would suggest." He picked up the sheet of paper on which he had been making notes, and ran his eye over its contents. "I've got the principal facts clear enough, but there are just one or two points on which I'd like a little more information. This young lady of yours, now—does she strike you as being pretty quick in the uptake?"

"I should describe her as distinctly intelligent," I said.

"And she's never had the least suspicion of Medlicot?"

"Not the slightest," I answered; "but, then, the same thing applies to everyone else.

The landlord, Bassett; the men at the club; and even the taxi-driver who brought me home —they can't all be fools."

"They can all be mistaken," he retorted. "There were plenty of people who knew Charlie Peace, and thought that he was a charming old gentleman who wouldn't hurt a fly." He leaned forward, resting his hands on his knees. "It was three men Miss Franklyn saw last night—she's quite certain of that?"

"Three altogether," I said. "One of them rowed out from the bank and took the others off."

"And when you came to look through your pockets this morning there was nothing missing?"

"Nothing," I said, "not even my note-case, and I'd ten pounds in it."

"But your things had been searched?"

I laughed. "There wasn't an inch of the ship that hadn't been examined. They'd even taken up the floorboards and had a peep at the bilge."

He once more consulted his paper. "Can you tell me the name of the book about her family which Miss Franklyn says is in the British Museum?"

"I'm not certain," I said. "I fancy it was called *The Burning of Bredbridge Abbey* or something of the sort." I waited for a moment while he wrote down the title. "What's your opinion?" I inquired. "Do you believe that

there's anything in this theory of ours about the cipher?"

He looked at me quizzically from under his bushy eyebrows. "Judging by the state of your forehead, I should say that there was a good deal in it."

"But supposing we're right," I persisted. "Supposing it does contain some message or secret that Medlicot wants to get hold of. How the devil are we to find out what he's really after?"

"There's only one way in which a detective finds out anything," he replied, "and that's by hard work." He glanced across at the clock on the mantelpiece. "And, seeing we're talking of work," he added, "the sooner I start in and do a little the better."

"You'll come and have some lunch first?" I protested.

He shook his head. "Not to-day, thank you, Mr. Cameron. I've several things I'd like to get on with this afternoon, and it's past two already." He stood up—a solid, purposeful figure in his blue reefer suit.

I hesitated. "We haven't arranged about terms yet," I said a little awkwardly. "Shall I give you a cheque to go on with?"

"No need for that at present," he replied. "I'll keep an account of what I spend, and as for anything else—well, we'll wait and see what you think my services are worth."

I rose, too, picking up the title-page which

was lying on the table. "You won't want this if you've got a copy," I said. "I'll take it with me and have another go at it to-night."

"I should leave it where it is if I were you," he said bluntly. "It will be a lot safer here than at Bredbridge."

"Oh, I'll look after it all right," I replied. "I've had one lesson, and I don't mean to get caught napping again." I folded it up carefully and put it back in my pocket. "Besides," I continued, "I shan't be alone much longer. I am expecting my friend Peter West down again on Friday or Saturday."

"Friday or Saturday," he repeated. "Couldn't you persuade him to go back with you to-night?"

"I don't suppose he can manage it," I said. "However, I'll get on to him and find out."

My companion nodded his approval. "I should feel more comfortable if I knew you had someone with you. This is an odd business, Mr. Cameron, and it looks to me as if we we're up against a pretty dangerous customer. You'll let me know at once if there are any fresh developments?"

"Yes," I said. "There's a 'phone at 'The Green Man,' about a couple of hundred yards from where I'm lying. I can always ring you up from there."

I retrieved my hat from the sofa, and, accompanying me along the passage, the inspector opened the front door.

"Well, good-bye for the present," he said.

"As soon as I've finished my inquiries here, I'll come down to Bredbridge and have a look round. In the meantime, take care of yourself and see that nothing happens to that young lady."

He smiled again as he uttered the last injunction, and with the comforting feeling that I had made a real and extremely valuable friend, I shook his hand gratefully and started off up the street.

CHAPTER XIII

FOOD being my first consideration, I thought that before going anywhere else I might as well test the resourcefulness of Mrs. Higgins. She would probably be able to scratch together a repast of some sort, and it would certainly be more pleasant lunching in my own comfortable dining-room than trailing out for a belated meal at a stuffy Kensington restaurant.

I therefore bent my steps in the direction of Campden Hill Cottage, and a few minutes later I was pushing open the little iron gate over which Mr. Skinner had hurled his departing threat. Mrs. Higgins must have observed my arrival through the kitchen window, for when I entered the house she was already emerging from the lower regions.

"Well, this is a surprise, sir," she ejaculated. "Why, I wasn't expecting you back not for three or four days."

"It's only a runaway visit," I explained. "I had to come up on a matter of business, so I thought I'd just drop in to see how things were."

"Have you had any lunch, sir?" she inquired.

"Not yet," I said tactfully, "but it's too late to bother you. I can easily run round to a restaurant."

"Oh, there's no need for that, sir," she replied, in an almost pained voice. "I've a nice chop in the larder, and it won't take me long to fry a few potatoes." She unlocked the study door, and, stepping in ahead of me, walked across to the window and drew up the blind.

"How have you been getting on?" I asked. "No more burglars or anything of that sort?"

She shook her head. "Only the young man from Barkers, who came to mend the pane, sir. I know he's all right, because he's a nephew of our fishmonger." She pointed to a small pile of envelopes which were lying on my desk. "Those are your letters, sir; and now, if you'll excuse me, I'll get down to the kitchen and put on that chop."

She bustled off, and, wondering vaguely what I could have done in some previous existence to have deserved the services of such a

treasure, I sat down and began to examine my correspondence.

It was of that depressing type which usually awaits a returning householder. There were two bills, three circulars, several appeals from charities, and a brightly written epistle from some lineal descendant of St. Paul, offering to lend me ten thousand pounds on my note of hand alone.

I dropped them indiscriminately into the waste-paper basket, and then, picking up the receiver from the telephone beside me, requested the exchange to put me on to the School of Tropical Diseases.

"Dr. West!" repeated a voice, in answer to my inquiry. "I am afraid he's out at present."

"Any chance of my catching him later?" I asked.

"Well, he's rather busy to-day, but he might be here again between six and six-thirty."

I reflected rapidly. The train I had intended to catch left Liverpool Street at six-twenty-five, but there was another—a deplorably slow one—at nine-fifteen, which was due at Woodtown shortly before midnight. It would be worth waiting for, however, just on the off-chance.

"Can I leave a message for him?" I inquired.

"Certainly."

"I want him to ring me up at the Adelphi Club. Cameron's my name—James Cameron."

"I'll see to it for you," came the obliging

response, and, since this appeared to be all that one could reasonably expect, I murmured my thanks and replaced the receiver.

I had suggested the Adelphi as it was fairly close to the scene of Peter's labours. However busy he might be, he would probably manage to slip round for a few minutes' talk, and I felt sure that, if he once heard my news, no American doctors who were ever born would be sufficiently alluring to keep him away from Bredbridge.

It was with this encouraging thought that I sauntered into the dining-room, where, in the space of about ten minutes, Mrs. Higgins and the chop duly made their appearance.

"I think you'll find it nice and tender," she remarked. "It ought to be all right, as I picked it out for my own supper." She glanced inquiringly at my strip of plaster. "I'm sorry to see that you've hurt yourself, sir."

"Oh, it's nothing serious," I replied. "I had a tumble in the cabin, that's all."

She shook her head. "I shouldn't treat it too lightly—not if I was you. An uncle of mine fell down and cut his head like that, and he died of irrysipilis." She placed the whisky and soda beside me, and retired to the door. "Still," she added, "he was a heavy drinker, and of course that makes a difference."

The statement, though no doubt correct, struck me as being a trifle ambiguous, but, whether intended as a compliment or a warning,

I did not allow it to interfere with my enjoyment. After an early breakfast, followed by the exertion of telling my story, I was in no mood for any kind of cowardly abstinence. I ate, drank, and refilled my glass in cheerful contentment, and finally, having loaded a well-seasoned pipe with my favourite mixture, I settled down in an armchair by the open window for a pleasant and contemplative smoke.

On the whole, it seemed to me that my morning had been well spent. Even if I failed to get hold of Peter, I had at least secured the co-operation of Mr. Jennifer—an ally in whom, despite his somewhat uncommunicative manner, I was already inclined to place a comforting reliance. As to what steps he proposed to take, I could only make a vague guess, but, judging by the little he had said, he evidently regarded the case as a serious one, and had no intention of allowing the grass to grow under his feet.

That he believed Medlicot to be a scoundrel was obvious. At no point in my story had he questioned me so closely as during my description of the evening when I had dined at the Hall. I had observed that he had even gone so far as to note down the name of the Spanish village which I had discovered in the library, written on the packet of dried flowers. Why such a detail should be worth troubling about it was beyond my power to perceive; still, the fact showed how strong his suspicions were, and how important he considered every trifle

which might throw any possible light on my next-door neighbour's history.

For my own part, having attained the object which had brought me up to Town, I was keenly impatient to get back to Bredbridge. No man likes to be robbed, tripped up in his own cabin, and generally made a complete fool of; and, although I tried to treat the matter with becoming philosophy, my injured vanity was smarting for revenge. Hitherto I had been like a man fighting in the dark. Now, at all events as far as Medlicot was concerned, the scales had fallen from my eyes, and I looked forward with considerable satisfaction to what I felt would be a more equal contest.

So attractive, indeed, was the prospect, that I sat brooding over it contentedly until nearly four o'clock. Then, feeling the need of a little exercise and fresh air, I knocked out my pipe, and, having said good-bye to Mrs. Higgins, started off on foot to walk up to the Adelphi.

I reached my destination just after the bar had opened. As anyone who is familiar with that most delightful of all clubs will readily believe, I was not by any means the first arrival. Half a dozen members, including a bookmaker, a popular K.C., and two well-known actors, were already in possession, and under the charm of their breezy and instructive conversation the time slipped away with remarkable rapidity.

No message having come through from Peter by seven, I decided that the best thing I could do would be to send round a note to his private address. I could at least let him know how things stood, and, even if he received it too late to catch the train, he might yet be able to turn up some time in the morning. I therefore made my way to a table in the "Silence Room," where, amid the subdued murmur of conversation peculiar to that apartment, I managed to compose the following letter:

"The Adelphi Club,
"7.15.

"My dear Peter,—I left an S.O.S. with one of your fellow germ-hunters, imploring you to ring me up here. I wanted to know if you could possibly come down with me this evening by the nine-fifteen from Liverpool Street, or, failing that, join me to-morrow. I have been in Town for the day having a heart-to-heart talk with our friend Inspector Jennifer, and he seems to think that *The Skylark* would be a much healthier ship if I had someone to keep me company. Hence these abortive efforts to get hold of you.

"The fact is that ever since you deserted us we have been having quite a busy and exciting time. It would take too long to tell you the whole story, but, putting it as short as possible, I have found out that Medlicot and Skinner are working together, and that

from all appearances one is as big a crook as the other.

"I may add that in the course of these researches I have already managed to collect a broken head, so you see that if by any chance you can trundle along either to-night or to-morrow you will be welcome, not only as a pal, but also as a doctor.

"Jean, too, is desperately anxious to see you again.

"Yours ever,

"JIM."

Knowing Peter, I felt convinced that, unless it were impossible for him to leave London, this letter would undoubtedly achieve its purpose. I accordingly addressed it to his rooms, and, carrying it downstairs, gave it the hall porter with instructions that he was to send out immediately for a special messenger.

A light dinner, followed by a leisurely cigar, just served to fill up the remaining interval, and shortly after nine I was standing at the door of an empty compartment, scanning the faces of my fellow-travellers as they came hurrying through the barrier. Not until the whistle sounded did I abandon hope. Then, in responce to an impassioned request from the guard, I scrambled into my seat, and a minute later we were gliding slowly out of the station on our long run to the Suffolk coast.

Having heard nothing of the outside world

since Saturday, I had provided myself with a large bundle of daily and weekly papers. They seemed to be chiefly filled with accounts of cricket matches and pictures of young women bathing—two branches of human activity to which I have only devoted a very superficial attention. Limited as the fare was, however, it at least helped me to while away the first half of my journey, and for the remainder I was content to sit patiently in my corner, making one more ineffectual effort to unravel the evasive message of Mr. Henry Franklyn.

At last, after innumerable stoppages and frequent clattering of milk-cans, we ran into the familiar if dimly lit precincts of Woodtown station. An old woman was the only other passenger to alight, and, following her past a yawning ticket collector, I emerged into the silent and deserted High Street. Any less encouraging prospect for a person in search of a cab it had never been my lot to encounter, Wordsworth's phrase about the very houses being asleep seemed to hit it off to perfection, and, as there was obviously nothing to do except to walk, I struck off briskly in the direction of Bredbridge.

Half an hour later I was back again in the cabin of *The Skylark*, with the cool night air drifting in through the open hatch. My first thought on getting aboard had naturally been to make sure whether anyone had visited the ship during my absence. A very brief inspection

had satisfied me that everything was exactly as Jean and I had left it after tidying up in the morning, and now, having stripped to my trousers and vest, I was pleasantly contemplating a long and well-earned sleep.

Before turning in, however, in accordance with my usual practice I stepped up on deck for a last look round. It was a fine starlit night and, leaning over the boom, I gazed across the water at the black cluster of trees which sheltered Bredbridge Abbey. Somewhere in the heart of that darkness Jean was sleeping peacefully in her quiet bedroom. I liked to think of her with her curly brown head against the white pillow, and, putting my fingers to my lips, I blew her an affectionate good-night kiss.

I was just turning away when my attention was arrested by some moving object which seemed to have crept out suddenly from the farther side of the wood. Nature has endowed me with quite a useful pair of eyes, and even at that distance I could see plainly enough that it was the figure of a man. Keeping well in the shadow of the trees, he came stealthily down the slope until he had reached a point about twenty yards from the river. Then, bending himself almost double, he hurried swiftly across the narrow strip of intervening marsh, and disappeared behind the sea wall.

With a queer feeling of uneasiness, I stood staring at the spot where he had vanished. Who was this solitary prowler, and why was

he so anxious to avoid being seen? Could he be one of the same gang who had laid me out and searched my pockets the night before, and, if so, what was he doing skulking about the Abbey grounds at one o'clock in the morning?

I recalled the inspector's last words, and my heart began to beat a little faster as I remembered that Jean was all alone in the house. Supposing one of these ruffians had taken it into his head to pay her a visit. They must have guessed by now that I had told her about the cipher, and what was more likely than that they should seize the chance of my being away to try and terrify her into betraying its hiding-place?

The mere thought acted on me like the jab of a spur. In less time than it takes to write the words I had swung myself down into the cabin, and was dragging on a jersey and a pair of rubber-soled shoes. Despite my haste, I had the sense to pick up an electric torch, which I thrust into my trouser pocket, and a minute later, bare-headed and consumed by all sorts of unpleasant forebodings, I was tugging away savagely for the opposite bank.

I landed just below the point where I had put Jean ashore on the day of our arrival. The tide was only half full, and there was still an awkward stretch of mud to be negotiated, but, splashing through it recklessly, I pulled the boat up after me, and in a couple of strides I had reached the white gate which led through into the wood.

Under the thick trees, now of course in full leaf, everything was as black as pitch. By the aid of my torch, however, I was able to distinguish the beginning of a path, and, knowing that it must bring me out somewhere near the house, I committed myself trustfully to its guidance.

I had advanced some twenty or thirty yards, tripping over roots and bumping my head against overhanging boughs, when I suddenly became aware of a faint yellow glow illuminating the darkness ahead. There was only one place it could come from, and that was the house. No other building existed anywhere within a quarter of a mile, and, assured now that Jean was awake, I hurried on more eagerly than ever.

At last I could see the gleam of what looked like a lighted window flashing and disappearing amongst the branches. Brighter and brighter it grew, until my eyes were so confused that I could barely follow the path; then, almost without warning, the trees came to an end, and, breathless and bewildered, I stumbled out into the open.

If I live to a hundred the horror of that moment will still be with me. Every drop of blood in my body seemed to rush back to my heart, and for an instant my legs felt as though they had been turned to stone.

Then, with a hoarse cry, I started running towards the house. The top storeys were in

darkness, but the red glare of flame which was pouring out through the lower windows lit up the garden as brightly as though it were day. A nail caught my jersey as I scrambled over the fence, tearing off a strip of it, and bringing me heavily to my knees. I was up again in a second, however, and, crashing through a tall bed of hollyhocks, landed on the gravel path outside the library. With my eyes smarting from the smoke, I stared up at the open window above.

"Jean!" I shouted. "Jean!"

There was no response.

Blinded and half choked, I blundered towards the porch, and as I did so my outstretched hand came in contact with the ivy. It was an old creeper, enormously thick and matted. My fingers closed upon its gnarled stem, and I realised in a flash that it was strong enough to bear my weight. Gripping it desperately, and digging my toes into every friendly crevice, I hauled myself up inch by inch until I was well above the level of the library. So fierce was the heat that I could feel the perspiration trickling into my eyes, and with each step that I climbed my task became more and more difficult.

By painful stages, however, I struggled on sideways and upwards, till at length the stone coping which jutted out beneath Jean's window was just within my reach. By a frantic wriggle I succeeded in getting my left arm over the sill. For a moment I hung there, swaying perilously

in mid-air; then suddenly the room sprang into light, and the next instant Jean herself was leaning over me, her bare arm flung tightly round my shoulder.

"Jim!" she cried. "Jim, what's the matter? What's happened?"

With a last effort I scrambled in over the ledge.

"Don't be frightened," I gasped. "The house is on fire, but we've plenty of time to get out."

She stood looking up at me—a little white, half-dazed figure in her thin silk nightdress.

"Quick!" I said almost roughly. "Put on some clothes—anything you can find. I'll have a look at the staircase."

I pushed her towards a chair, littered with feminine belongings, and, hurrying across the room, jerked open the door. As I stepped out on to the passage, a blast of smoke and hot air beat up into my face. The landing below was blazing like a furnace, while streamers of yellow flame was already licking hungrily round the banisters.

It only needed one glance to show that escape that way was hopeless, and, stumbling back again, I closed the door behind me.

"We're a bit late for the stairs, Jean," I said hoarsely. "I shall have to make a rope out of your sheets."

She smiled and nodded to me from the opposite corner, where she was sitting quietly in the chair, pulling on her shoes and stockings.

"That will give me a chance to finish dressing," she said.

There were a couple of sheets on the bed, both fortunately of stout linen. I tore them off, and, knotting them tightly together, tested the result by two or three vigorous tugs. Then, dragging the bedstead up to the window, I fastened one end to the bottom rail.

"Nearly ready?" I inquired.

Clad in a sailing-jersey, and buttoning her skirt at the side, Jean emerged through the smoke.

"It's a bit short," I explained, "but that can't be helped. You'll have to jump when you get to the library. I'd better go first, and then I can catch you."

"I hope you're a better catch than Peter," she said. "I've still got a big bruise where he dropped me on the deck."

"I won't let you go," I assured her, and, wiping my eyes with the back of my hand, I clambered out through the open window.

Strong as it proved to be, our hastily constructed life-line was even shorter than I imagined, and by the time I had reached the end of it, I was still some twelve or fourteen feet from the ground. With spurts of flame shooting up round my legs, however, I was in no mood to worry about trifles. All I wanted was to reach the solid earth as quickly as possible, so, thrusting myself away from the wall, I dropped blindly into space.

How I escaped breaking a leg, heaven knows! By some miracle, however, I found myself sprawling on the gravel, almost unhurt, and sheltering my face from the blinding heat, I struggled dizzily to my feet.

Jean, who could evidently climb like a cat, was already scrambling after me. I caught a glimpse of her swaying to and fro against the ivy, just above the reach of the flames, and, scorched as I was, I managed to force myself a step nearer.

"Now!" I cried huskily.

Down she came, almost straight on top of me, and, clutching her in my arms, I managed to break her fall. Then, gasping and half suffocated, I reeled backwards to the edge of the drive, where we brought up with a bump against a low iron gateway.

"Jean, Jean," I muttered. "Thank God you're safe!"

She lay quite passive, her head resting against my shoulder.

"That was a splendid catch, Jim," she whispered. "You ought to give Peter some lessons."

I kissed the only place I could reach, which was the tip of her little smoke-grimed ear, and then, realising my hold, lowered her gently to the ground. As I did so, there was a long rumbling crash, and the top window above the kitchen burst into a red glow.

Jean drew in her breath quickly. "We hadn't too much time after all," she observed.

"We must get help somehow," I exclaimed. "I'll run down to 'The Green Man' and——"

"What's the use?" she interrupted. "The nearest fire-engine's at Woodtown, and it would be half an hour before they could get here. Everything will be burned long before that."

As though to confirm the truth of her statement, a sudden shower of tiles and débris came clattering down on to the gravel. One large piece struck the ground almost at our feet, and, seizing her by the arm, I drew her back through the gate.

"I'm afraid you're right," I said. "It's a hopeless business, from the look of it. Have you any idea how it started?"

She shook her head. "Not the slightest. I've been over at Ipswich with Mary all the afternoon, and I didn't get home till nearly eight o'clock. I was feeling rather tired, so I just had a little supper and went straight to bed. The next thing I remember is waking up suddenly with a feeling that something was wrong. I lit the candle, and then I saw you looking in at the window."

"Did you leave anything burning downstairs?" I asked.

"Nothing," she said. "It's not dark now till nearly ten, so there was no need to bother about lighting the lamp. I didn't even smoke a cigarette, not till I was in bed." I suppose she must have seen something queer in my expression,

for with a sudden movement she laid her hand on my sleeve. "What's the matter? Why are you looking like that?"

I hesitated for an instant, half appalled myself at the hideous suspicion which had flashed across my mind.

"You must know something," she persisted; "you wouldn't have come here without a reason." She stepped back, her grey eyes riveted on my face. "Jim!" she cried. "It wasn't an accident! Somebody set fire to the house on purpose!"

"It's a pretty horrible thing to suggest," I said slowly, "but before God I believe it's true."

There was a moment's silence.

"Tell me, Jim," she whispered. "I'm not frightened."

I put my arm round her, and in a very few words I described what I had seen from the deck of *The Skylark*.

"It was too dark to make out who the swine was," I finished, "but I guessed at once that he'd been up to some devilment. I thought he might have been trying to break into the house in search of the cipher, so I slipped across in the dinghy and came up through the wood." I paused. "You can imagine how I felt when I saw the whole place in flames."

"How did you feel?" demanded Jean. "I'd rather like to know."

I drew her still closer. "I made a tremendous

discovery, Jean," I said. "I found out how much I loved you."

She gave a little contented laugh, and, lifting up my hand, rubbed the back of it against her cheek. "That's all right, Jim dear," she said. "Then I don't mind people trying to burn me alive."

"But I do," I remarked grimly. "If I knew who'd done this damnable thing, I'd smash his face in and trample on it afterwards."

"That would be dreadful," said Jean. "They might put you in prison." She looked up at me gravely. "I believe it was Medlicot."

I was unable to repress an involuntary start, for the same thought was in my own mind.

"Why?" I asked.

She shook her head. "I don't know—it's just a feeling I've got. Ever since you told me about seeing him at Eastport——" She broke off. "Jim, what did the detective say?"

"He thinks Medlicot's a scoundrel," I answered slowly, "but——"

"Is he going to help us?" she demanded.

I nodded. "He's promised to do everything he possibly can. He would have come back with me to-night, only he wants to make some inquiries in London first." I pulled out my watch, and by the red glow of the flames I saw that it was a quarter to two. "It's no use our stopping here, Jean," I said. "We'd better get along down to 'The Green Man' and

knock them up. I suppose they can find you a bed."

"Can't I stay on *The Skylark* with you?" she asked.

"I wish you could," I said. "The trouble is that we should be alone together."

She opened her eyes. "What does that matter? I'm sure I don't want anyone else."

I hesitated. "It wouldn't do, Jean. There are so many people around who always like to think the worst of everybody. Some of them would be sure to start saying nasty things about you."

Before she could answer, we were interrupted by the sound of voices and footsteps. We both spun round in the direction from which they came, and as we did so the gate in the fence was suddenly flung open, and Mr. Sam Bassett, followed by a small boy, projected himself into the garden.

"Talk of angels," I said. "Here's the very man we want."

The two of them came hurrying towards us, Mr. Bassett's usually stolid face registering all sorts of poignant emotions.

"Gawd 'elp us, Miss Jean," he panted. "Whatever 'ave you been gettin' up to now?"

Jean smiled at him soothingly. "I haven't been getting up to anything, Sam. The house caught fire while I was asleep."

"While you was asleep!" he repeated.

"Up there in my bedroom," said Jean,

pointing to the now blazing window. "Luckily for me, Mr. Cameron spotted the light from his boat, and got across just in time to pull me out." She patted him on the shoulder. "You see, you're quite right, Sam. You've always told me I was born to be drowned."

Lifting his arm, the landlord wiped his face, which was streaming with perspiration. Then he turned to me.

"There's guts for you," he remarked admiringly. "Makin' a jest of it, she is, and every thing the poor lass got in the world burning to ashes."

"Well, it's no use crying," said Jean. "That won't put the fire out. You ought to have turned up sooner, Sam."

He shook his head. "I shouldn't be 'ere now, not if it wasn't for young George. Doin' a bit o' night fishin', 'e was, an' see the sparks shooting up through the trees. 'E run in to tell me, and the first thing I done is to ring up Joe Grimes. Kep' me five minutes, that did, while they was wakin' 'im up."

"Who's Joe Grimes?" I demanded.

"Joe Grimes," reiterated Mr. Bassett. "Why, the captain o' the Woodtown Fire Brigade."

"Is the engine coming?" I asked.

"Well, Joe's gone off to look for the 'orses. They're out at grass, round with Farmer Truman."

"That sounds hopeful," I said. "In the

meantime, what are we going to do with Miss Franklyn? Can you find a bed for her at the inn?"

"Why, to be sure," was the answer. "There's my daughter's room, and the Lord knows she's welcome to that an' anything else we got."

He stepped towards the boy, who was standing a little distance away, gaping entranced at the flames.

"George," he shouted, "you cut along back and ask the missus to get Annie's room ready. Tell 'er what's happened, and say we'll be along in a few minutes."

I turned to Jean, who, while we were talking, had seated herself on the step of the sundial.

"I'll come with you to see that you're comfy Jean dear," I said. "You're looking awfully tired, and if you can only get a few hours' sleep it will do you a world of good."

I took her hands and raised her gently to her feet.

"Just as you like, Jim," she said submissively. "Only I'd much rather have stayed with you."

CHAPTER XIV

HAVING emerged successfully from a long yawn, I rubbed my eyes and looked across at the clock on the after-bulkhead. The hands were pointing to a quarter past nine.

For a moment I stared at it incredulously; then, sitting up, I reached out for my watch, which was lying on the cabin table. It proved to be in complete agreement.

With an unprintable observation I flung back the blanket. I had promised Jean that I would be round to breakfast with her at "The Green Man" by half-past eight, and here I was, three-quarters of an hour late and still unshaved.

Contenting myself with a hasty scrape in cold water, I scrambled into some clothes and hurried up on deck. It was a heavenly morning, but there was something that met my eyes as I stepped out into the sunshine which rendered all other considerations comparatively unimportant. It was the spectacle of Jean shipping her oars and smiling at me mockingly, as the dinghy in which she was sitting bumped up alongside.

"This is very nice of you," I said. "I didn't expect to be fetched."

"You're not being fetched," she retorted. "I had my breakfast ages ago, and I've simply got tired of waiting for you."

I bent down and helped her on board. "I'm

awfully sorry, Jean," I said. "I always oversleep myself after a fire."

She laughed. "It seems to work just the opposite way with me."

I kissed her cheek. "All the same," I said, you're looking extraordinarily fresh and beautiful."

"I got up at seven and had a swim," she explained. "I suppose that's what made me so hungry."

"Well, I shan't bother about breakfast," I said. "I don't deserve any after my disgraceful behaviour."

"Oh, that's nonsense," she replied firmly; "and, besides, I should like another cup of tea myself. I'll come down to the cabin and get it ready for you."

Remembering how efficiently she had performed the previous morning, I raised no objections to her proposal. I followed her below, and a few minutes later I was comfortably ensconced against a pile of bunk cushions, with the Primus roaring away cheerfully inside the fo'c'sle, and an appetising odour of fried bacon drifting out through the open door.

"Here you are, Jim!" she said, emerging with a plateful of crisp shavings. "You get on with that while I make the tea."

"It's a queer thing," she said, as she reappeared carrying the pot, "but, in spite of what happened last night, I'm somehow or other feeling frightfully happy." She seated herself on the opposite

bunk, and, resting her chin on her hand, regarded me thoughtfully across the table. "I think it must be because I know you like me."

"I don't like you," I said, with my mouth full. "I've been wildly in love with you from the first minute I saw you. I only found it out when I thought you were a little heap of ashes."

She sighed contentedly. "You're very slow, Jim. I've wanted you to kiss me so much, though of course I couldn't tell you."

"Of course not," I agreed. "It would have been a shocking thing for a child of your age to suggest. By the way, how old are you, Jean?"

"Seventeen," she said. "That's not too young to get married, is it?"

"Not a bit," I replied; "especially for a girl who can cook bacon like you do."

"Well, I suppose we ought to get married," she remarked reflectively. "I don't mind about it myself, but if I had any children I should like them to be legitimate."

"As a retired civil servant," I said, "I should absolutely insist on it." I leaned forward and ran my fingers through her curly hair. "How would you like to chuck the whole thing?" I suggested. "Leave these people to do what they damned well please, and come back with me now to London? It's a fair wind, and we should be at Leigh by sunset. We could get married almost immediately by special licence, sail over

to Holland, and spend the rest of the summer loafing about the Dutch rivers and making love to each other. You've only to say yes, and we'll push off at once—at least soon as I've finished this bacon."

She sat looking at me in silence, her eyes shining and her lips slightly parted. Then she shook her head.

"No, Jim," she said slowly. "It would be perfectly lovely, but I'm not going to run away, and neither are you."

I patted her on the shoulder. "Bravo, partner," I said; "that's just the answer I knew you'd make."

"It would spoil everything if we felt we'd given in," she continued. "I don't mind being beaten, not if people fight fairly, but after last night——" She paused. "What's that?"

Faint but distinct through the open hatch came the familiar throb of an engine.

I jumped up from the bunk, knocking over my cup.

"It's Medlicot," I said.

We stood listening, while a little stream of tea pattered gently on the floor.

"It's his boat, anyhow," she said quietly. "There's no other Evinrud on the river." She gave a queer little laugh. "I don't suppose he slept very well either."

"We're only guessing, Jean," I reminded her. "We don't know for certain." I edged my

way out from behind the table. "He mustn't dream that we suspect him," I whispered. "Can you play the game if he comes on board?"

She nodded.

"Of course you can," I said. "Goodness knows what made me ask such a fatuous question."

She picked up the cup, which she replaced on the saucer, and then, pulling down her jersey, stepped towards the after-cabin.

"I'll go first this time, Jim," she said. "I want to see his face when he catches sight of me."

Without waiting for an answer, she disappeared up the companion, and, feeling rather like a general who has been suddenly deprived of his command, I made all haste to follow her example.

By the time I reached the deck the approaching boat was not more than thirty yards distant. It contained only one occupant, the amiable and debonair figure of Mr. Horace Medlicot, who was already leaning forward in his seat waving a greeting to Jean.

With as hospitable a smile as I could assume I strolled up to where she was standing.

"Hallo, Medlicot," I called out. "Just heard the news?"

He ran neatly alongside, and, switching off his engine, caught hold of our counter.

"I knew nothing about it until half an hour ago," he replied. "I got the shock of my life

when Gull came in and told me." He turned to Jean. "My poor child, it's absolutely heart-breaking! I can't find any words to express my sympathy."

She looked down at him innocently. "It is bad luck, isn't it?" she said. "I thought you'd be sorry when you heard what had happened."

"One can only thank God you're safe and sound," he exclaimed. "If Gull's story is true we owe that to you, Cameron."

I shrugged my shoulders. "I expect there are all sorts of wild yarns flying about. The fact is, I happened to come up on deck just as the flames were beginning to show through the trees. I bundled across and did what I could, but, of course, it was too late to save the house.

"You saved my life, anyway," said Jean, "and I'm going to tell Mr. Medlicot all about it."

I bent down and secured the painter. "Well, you can entertain him while I take charge of the boat," I said. "If you want to say anything complimentary about me, that will give you a free hand."

With a smiling observation to the effect that heroes were always modest, Medlicot stepped on board, and, working the dinghy carefully aft, I made her fast to one of the stern cleats. Then, lighting a cigarette, I sauntered back to where I had left them.

"You needn't be alarmed," remarked Medlicot. "I'm not going to embarrass you by wringing your hand or saying that I'm proud to know you; all the same, from what this little lady tells me——"

"There's nothing particularly wonderful about climbing up a creeper," I interrupted. "It's only what a tom cat does every time he goes courting." I paused. "The thing that really is extraordinary," I added, "is how the fire broke out."

He looked me frankly in the face. "That's what I've been puzzling over myself. Haven't you any theory?"

"I had a talk with the captain of the brigade when they turned up," I replied. "He suggested that there might have been a wooden beam smouldering away behind the kitchen grate, and that it suddenly broke into flames. It doesn't sound very probable to me, but I'm hanged if I can think of anything better."

"He may be right," said Medlicot. "I heard of a similar case in Yorkshire some years ago. Of course, these old houses burn like tinder as soon as they get well alight." He turned again to Jean, who was sitting on the capstan glancing up at him sideways. "I don't know whether you've made any plans or arrangements yet, my dear child, but I do hope that for the time being you will look on the Hall as if it were your own home. I can shift my quarters to *The Flying Cloud*, where I shall be

perfectly comfortable, and Mrs. Chandler, my housekeeper, will be only too pleased to take care of you."

Jean gave him a grateful smile. "You're awfully kind and thoughtful, Mr. Medlicot," she said, "but I couldn't come to you very well without hurting the Bassetts' feelings. You see, old Sam was devoted to my father, and he and his wife made such a fuss of me last night, and seemed so pleased at the idea that I was going to stay there for a bit, that I wouldn't have the heart to disappoint them."

Our visitor nodded. "I understand perfectly. I was a great admirer of your father, too, my dear, and for his sake, as well as your own, I hope that, if there's any way in which I can be of use to you, you won't hesitate to let me know." He paused. "I suppose you have scarcely had time to think about the future at all yet?"

"Well, I shan't leave the Abbey," said Jean; "that's quite certain. Of course I can't afford to rebuild the house, but it oughtn't to be very difficult to pick up a cheap wooden bungalow which would do well enough for me and Mary. Mr. Cameron has promised to start hunting around at once."

Medlicot favoured me with a quick glance of inquiry. "Then you'll be stopping on here for a little while, I hope?"

"Oh, yes," I said casually. "I've nothing particular to do in Town, and I can't run away

and desert Miss Franklyn just when she's in the middle of all this trouble. Besides," I continued, "there's something I'm rather curious about personally—something I mean to get to the bottom of before I leave Bredbridge."

Medlicot raised his eyebrows. "Really?"

"It happened the night we dined at the club," I went on. "When I got back to *The Skylark* after I left you, I found some visitors in the cabin."

"Visitors!" he repeated. "What—people you knew?"

I shook my head. "I can't say; it was quite dark, and they didn't give me time to strike a match. One of them tripped me up directly I stepped inside, and as I fell I bashed my forehead against the table and stunned myself. Hence the sticking-plaster."

"But this is outrageous!" exclaimed Medlicot warmly. "Why on earth didn't you come along and tell me at once?"

"I had no time yesterday," I explained. "I had to run up to Town on business. The funny thing is," I added, "that in the end they seem to have cleared off without pinching anything. I supposed they thought I was dead, and got the wind up."

"It's none the less serious all the same," said Medlicot. "Have you spoken about it to the police?"

"Not yet," I replied. "I haven't even decided for certain whether I shall. I've got

a sort of feeling that it would be rather fun if one could run them to earth oneself."

With that sudden infectious laugh of his, Medlicot clapped me on the shoulder.

"You're certainly a sportsman, Cameron, and although as a law-abiding citizen I've no right to encourage you, I must say that idea of yours rather appeals to me. If you're really serious, it's just possible I might be of some use to you. My skipper, Gull, keeps his eyes pretty wide open, and, should there have been any bad characters hanging about the place lately, he'll probably know who they are and where they come from. I'll sound him tactfully when I get back, and if there's anything to report I'll let you know."

"I'm quite sure it couldn't have been any of our people," put in Jean. "They're a splendidly honest lot, aren't they, Mr. Medlicot?"

"They certainly ought to be, with such a charming champion," he responded gallantly.

"It seems to me that I'm neglecting my duty as a host," I observed. "Won't you have a bottle of beer or a whisky and soda or something?"

"What, at this hour in the morning?" he exclaimed. "My dear Cameron, we middle-aged gentlemen have to think of our health. Besides," he continued, consulting his watch, "I'm afraid I must get back now, because I'm expecting a telephone call from London. I really only ran down just to make sure that our little friend was quite safe and sound."

"Hardly a scratch," said Jean, smiling. "If Mr. Bassett's right, and it was the old monks trying to carry out their curse, I'm afraid they must be feeling frightfully disappointed."

I don't know whether it was my imagination, but I thought I could detect a momentary gleam of satisfaction in Medlicot's face.

"I suppose all the blockheads about here will say that," he replied contemptuously. "Well, I won't suggest your coming over this evening, because I'm sure you must both be in need of a good night's rest. To-morrow, however, you must certainly dine with me, and we'll go into the little lady's affairs and see what's the best thing to be done." He shook our hands in turn, and, escorting him to his dinghy, I stood by ready to cast off the painter.

"Oh, there's one thing I meant to ask you, Cameron," he added, as he settled himself at the tiller. "How about that nice friend of yours—the man you call Peter? Any chance of his being down again this week-end?"

"He might come any time," I said. "It just depends whether he can get away."

Medlicot started his engine. "I'd like to see him again. You'll bring him with you, of course, if he turns up."

He waved farewell to both of us, and, gliding out from under our stern, swung off down-stream in the direction of the Hall.

It was Jean who was the first to break the

silence. She had come up quietly alongside of me and slipped her hand into mine.

"I'm frightened of him, Jim," she said in a low voice. "I don't think I'm a coward, but somehow or other he makes me feel cold inside."

"You didn't show it," I said. "You played the game like a brick." I stared across the rapidly broadening stretch of water which already separated us from our retreating visitor. "My God, Jean," I whispered, "if we're right about last night, that chap must be a devil in human shape."

"Perhaps he is," said Jean. "There used to be devils, and lots of people about here still believe in them."

"I don't know whether Mr. Jennifer does," I remarked. "Anyhow, he's the gentleman I'm anxious to have a talk to, and it seems to me that the sooner we get in touch with him the better."

"It won't take us long," replied Jean. "Directly that boat's out of sight we'll go back to the inn and ring him up."

"I'd give my head to have Peter here," I muttered disconsolately. "If he got my letter, I can't think why I haven't heard from him by now."

"There may be a wire waiting for you," she answered. "It was only just after nine when I came away, and the post office doesn't open till half-past."

She stood silent for a minute, watching the dwindling shape of the dinghy as it spluttered its way round the nearest bend, and then, letting go my hand, stepped across to where she had hitched up her own boat.

"Come along, Jim," she said. "He can't see us now, and I'm dying to know what your detective thinks."

A ten-minutes' pull brought us to the small landing-stage at the back of "The Green Man," where two or three geese and a number of ducks were paddling contentedly about in the shallow water. We disembarked amid a chorus of quacks and hisses, and were in the act of making our way towards the house when Mr. Bassett emerged hastily through the open doorway.

"Come in the nick of time, you 'ave," he called out. "There's a party from London askin' for you on the telephone. I was just sendin' the boy to give you a hail."

I hurried forward, "Is it Dr. West?" I asked. "That friend of mine who came down with me?"

He gave a short rumbling chuckle. "Didn't sound so. More like a lady's voice, I reckon.

"Perhaps I'd better stop outside," suggested Jean mischievously.

"No," I said, "you come with me. If it isn't Peter, it must be someone speaking for him. He has probably dashed off to catch a train and told his landlady to ring me up."

Leading the way in, Mr. Bassett conducted

us to the instrument, which was hanging in the passage outside the bar.

"There you are, sir," he observed. "You needn't be afraid o' talkin' free, not if you want to. There ain't no one about except my missus, and she's as deaf as a post."

He withdrew tactfully, and, stepping forward, I picked up the receiver.

"Hullo," I said. "This is Mr. Cameron speaking. Who are you?"

"I'm Mr. Jennifer's sister," replied a voice which I recognised at once. "My brother is very anxious to see you to-day, and he wants to know if you can come to London."

"Well, that's curious," I remarked. "As a matter of fact, I was on the point of giving him a ring."

"He went off directly after breakfast," was the answer, "and he told me that he would probably be out all day. If you can come here, he will telephone later and leave a message where you can meet him. He says it's very urgent."

I hesitated. "D'you mind holding on for a second," I said; then, covering the mouthpiece with my hand, I turned to Jean. "It's Jennifer's sister," I explained. "He wants me to come up to Town."

She nodded. "You must go, of course. He wouldn't send for you if it wasn't something important."

"How about trains?" I asked.

"There's the eleven-thirty from Woodtown —you'll just have time to catch that. It gets you up at one-fifteen."

I turned again to the instrument. "Very well," I said. "I'll be along at your place at a quarter to two. If your brother rings up before then, will you give him a message from me?"

"Certainly," was the reply.

"Tell him that Bredbridge Abbey was burned to the ground last night, but that Miss Franklyn is quite safe."

She repeated the words after me, and, having satisfied myself that she had heard both names correctly, I replaced the receiver.

"I'm glad you're going to see him," said Jean. "You couldn't have explained everything properly over the 'phone."

"It would have been a bit awkward," I admitted, "especially if the lady at the post office happened to be listening in." I glanced along the passage to make sure that no one could overhear us. "The only thing that worries me," I added, "is leaving you here by yourself. I wish to God Peter would turn up."

"Perhaps he will," she replied; "anyhow, I shall be all right. I'm going into Eastport with Sam to do some shopping."

"What sort of shopping?" I asked.

She laughed. "Clothes, Jim. I've only got what I'm standing up in, and there's not much of them."

"I'm a thoughtless brute," I said penitently. "Look here, you'd better let me give you some money."

She shook her head. "I can cash a cheque at the bank. I've got about twenty pounds left out of what Mr. Wiltshire paid me for the books."

As she spoke, the clock in the passage began to strike, and, looking up, I saw that it was a quarter to eleven.

"You ought to be going," she said. "It's over two miles to the station, and if you miss that train there isn't another for hours!"

I took her face between my hands, and, bending down, kissed her little soft red lips.

"Just a good-night one, in case I'm late," I whispered. "I may not get back until the last train."

Her grey eyes danced merrily. "You needn't worry, Jim dear. I'm going to sit up and let you in."

. . . . . .

I had no need to ring the bell of 26 Campden Hill Terrace, for as my taxi drew up I caught sight of Miss Jennifer standing on the doorstep. She was in the act of handing a bag to a messenger-boy, and on seeing me her somewhat severe features relaxed into what was evidently intended to be a smile of welcome.

"Why, this is a pity," she remarked. "If you'd only come a little sooner you'd have been

able to speak to my brother yourself. He was on the 'phone not more than a quarter of an hour ago."

"Well, it can't be helped," I said, shaking hands with her. "I did all I could short of bribing the engine-driver."

I stepped inside, and, leading the way along the passage, she conducted me to the sitting-room where Jennifer and I had had our talk the day before.

"Did you give him my message?" I asked, as she followed me in, closing the door behind her.

"Oh, yes, Mr. Cameron, I gave him that all right, and if you'll just wait a minute I'll tell you what he says. I wrote it down specially, so that there shouldn't be any mistake."

She walked to the desk where the telephone stood, and picked up a writing-pad which was lying alongside of it.

"He wants you to meet him in the lounge at the Grosvenor Hotel, opposite Victoria Station, at a quarter to nine this evening."

"A quarter to nine!" I repeated. "Are you certain you've got the time right?"

"Quite certain," she replied.

"He might have made it a bit earlier," I objected. "My last train goes at nine-fifteen, and if I miss that I shall have to stop in London." I paused. "And why the Grosvenor?" I asked. "It seems a frightfully out-of-the-way place for both of us."

She hesitated. "He's travelling over to the Continent to-night—at least, so I understand. Anyhow, he told me to pack his bag and send it to the station for him. I expect he wants to have a talk with you just before he starts."

I looked at her in growing bewilderment.

"Going abroad!" I exclaimed. "Why, I thought he was coming down to stay with me."

"I can't say anything about that, sir," was her answer. "I know he's very anxious to see you, and I'm sure he wouldn't put you to any inconvenience, not if he could help it."

"Well, I must do as he suggests, of course," I said, and with this somewhat ungracious observation I wished the worthy lady good-bye and took my departure.

I was indeed feeling very far from pleased with Mr. Jennifer as I walked aimlessly along the almost deserted pavement. Had he only let me know that he would be unable to see me until the evening, I could have spent a pleasant day with Jean, and come up to Town by one of the later trains. As it was, I should have to cool my heels for about six or seven hours, and, what was even more annoying, I should then in all probability have lost my last chance of getting back to Bredbridge before the following morning. In my present mood, the thought of being separated from Jean for such an extended period filled me with an unreasoning resentment, and for a moment I was half tempted to hail the

next taxi I met and tell the man to drive me straight back to Liverpool Street.

Before I reached the end of the road, however, saner counsels were beginning to assert themselves. After all, Jennifer knew his own business better than anyone else, and, as he had chosen to select this particular time and place for our meeting, it was up to me to fall in with his arrangements. What it all meant I was unable to fathom, but he certainly wouldn't be rushing over to the Continent without some excellent reason, and that reason, since he had taken the trouble to telephone for me from Bredbridge, it was evidently his intention to explain.

I pulled up by the pillar-box at the corner and indulged in a few moments' reflection. The simplest method of whiling away the time would be to go along and play billiards at the club, but before leaving Kensington there were two things which demanded my immediate attention. I must let Mrs. Higgins know that I should probably be sleeping in Town, and I must then wire to Jean, who would otherwise be sitting up half the night worrying herself into a fever over my non-appearance.

Both these duties I accordingly discharged, and having by that time completely recovered from my temporary petulance, I jumped on to a passing 'bus in the High Street, which deposited me, after half an hour's ride, at the hospitable doorway of the Adelphi.

Here, as usual, I discovered one or two regular habitués—men who seemed to be as much a part of the club as the stuffed alligator in the hall. After a little persuasion I succeeded in decoying a couple of them to the billiard-room, where we gambled away the time at a penny a ball snooker, and finished up by dining on lobster and bottled stout at the winner's expense.

Refreshed by this excellent repast, I then drove to the Grosvenor. The big lounge was more or less deserted, and, selecting a quiet corner, I ordered a cup of coffee, and settled down to wait for Jennifer. The minutes slipped by, and I was just beginning to become a trifle restless when he pushed his way in through the glass door and came striding across to where I was sitting. He was wearing a bowler hat and carrying a light fawn overcoat.

"Very sorry to have kept you hanging around like this," he began, "but it really wasn't my fault, Mr. Cameron. I've been on the run ever since ten o'clock this morning."

"You had better let me prescribe for you, then," I said, and, signalling to the attendant who was hovering in the background, I gave an order for a double whisky and soda.

"Well, I won't refuse it," he remarked, dropping into an adjoining chair. "It's the last I'm likely to get for several days, unless I have one on the boat going over."

I looked at him encouragingly. "You sound

as if you'd been making some discoveries," I observed.

"Quite a lot," was his reply, "but before I start talking myself I want to hear something more about this fire at the Abbey. Only just the bare facts, please; we haven't too much time."

As rapidly as I could I described my experiences of the previous night, winding up with a brief account of Medlicot's visit to *The Skylark*. All the time I was speaking my companion sat beside me in grim silence, his hard blue eyes fixed intently on my face. When I had concluded he took a long pull at his tumbler.

"It sounds an uncommonly ugly business," he said slowly, "and, to be quite frank, I'm hanged if I can make it out. If this is our friend Medlicot's work, he must be in an even tighter corner than I imagined."

"What have you found out about him?" I demanded.

"Only what I've found out about a good many other gentlemen of the same sort. He's a gambler, Mr. Cameron, a confirmed, hopeless gambler, and when a man has got that particular weakness there's no depth in hell to which he can't sink."

"But where did you learn all this?" I asked.

He smiled pleasantly. "I've some good friends at the Yard still, and they've ways of picking up information that the outside public know nothing about. You can take it from me

that Medlicot's at the end of his tether. He has been speculating heavily for the last year, and, unless something turns up to save him, he's booked for a pretty nasty crash." He put down his glass. "Drowning men clutch at straws, Mr. Cameron, and in this case I fancy the straw happens to be in your possession."

I looked round, to make certain that there was no one within earshot.

"Then it *is* the cipher," I whispered. "You don't mean to say you've discovered its meaning?"

He shook his head. "Not yet, but I think I know where to look for it." He paused. "You remember that book you told me about—the one that was written by an old clergyman at Orford?"

I nodded.

"It's still in the British Museum. I got hold of it yesterday afternoon. There's a good deal about Henry Franklyn in it, and, what's more, there's a remarkably interesting reference to his son."

I felt my heart beginning to beat a shade quicker.

"That son, whose name was Charles Franklyn, was born in 1625. The year the Civil War broke out—when he was seventeen—he seems to have been ill, and his father sent him abroad. Perhaps the old man guessed that things would go badly, and wanted to get his boy out of the way."

"Well, what happened?" I asked.

"What generally happens when people try to be too clever. Before he had been out of England eighteen months Charles Franklyn was dead. He was killed by a fall of rock while he was crossing the Pyrenees."

I sat up abruptly. "The Pyrenees!" I echoed.

"And I'll tell you something more, Mr. Cameron; I'll tell you where his grave is. He's buried in a tiny mountain village three miles from St. Étienne de Luz."

I stared at him for a moment without speaking. "By Jove!" I said slowly. "That's the place where Medlicot collected those flowers!"

The inspector nodded his head. "It's the place where he collected something else too, I'm thinking. Anyhow, if he didn't, I shall be wasting your money and my time."

"You're going to Spain?" I exclaimed.

"Straight through from Paris," he answered. "I shall catch the early morning express, and be in St. Étienne by night."

"And what will you do when you get there?" I demanded.

"Find out where Medlicot stayed, and how he spent his time."

"But it's two or three months ago," I objected.

"What of that? You don't suppose a stray Englishman can go messing about a Spanish village without attracting a good deal of attention?

They'll remember him right enough, and, what's more, I shall have a man with me who'll know how to make 'em talk."

"Who's that?" I inquired.

"The smartest private detective in Spain—a fellow from Madrid. I did him a good turn once when I was at the Yard, and he's not the sort of chap who's likely to forget it. I've wired him to meet me to-morrow night at St. Étienne."

"I'm tremendously obliged to you, Jennifer," I said. "I'd no idea I was letting you in for a job like this."

"I'm afraid it's going to cost you a tidy bit," he remarked. "One can't do things on the cheap when one's in a hurry."

"Oh, hang the expense!" I exclaimed recklessly. "I don't care a damn how much you spend, if you'll only find out what this devil's up to."

"I'll do the best I can," he replied; "that I promise you." He glanced at his watch, and then, finishing off the remainder of his drink, rose to his feet. "I shall have to be getting across the road in a minute," he continued; "but before I go I've a piece of advice to give you, and I hope you'll carry it out."

"You can be quite sure I shall," I said.

"Go back to Bredbridge by the first train in the morning and bring Miss Franklyn straight up to London. If she has any friends or relatives here, send her to stay with them. If

not, get her a room in some quiet, respectable hotel."

"That's more or less what I proposed this morning," I said. "The trouble is that she objects to what she calls 'running away.'"

He eyed me thoughtfully for a moment, his head a little on one side.

"You're rather fond of this young lady, aren't you?"

"Very," I replied.

"Then get her away," he said quietly. "Get her away from Bredbridge, even if you have to carry her to the train."

CHAPTER XV

THE rackety fly which I had hired at Woodtown drew up in front of "The Green Man," and, stepping out into the morning sunshine. I rewarded its aged driver with a five-shilling piece.

He was mumbling his thanks when Mr. Bassett appeared in the doorway.

"'Tis you then, sir," he observed in a relieved voice. "Guessed it might be when I see the cab coming down the 'ill."

"Yes, I just managed to catch the early train," I said cheerfully. "Where's Miss Franklyn?"

The cabman gathered up his reins, and, jerking his steed into an ambling trot, disappeared round the corner.

Mr. Bassett came a pace nearer. It struck me suddenly that he was looking a trifle perturbed.

"Where is she?" he repeated. "Well, between ourselves, that's exactly what I want to know."

"What do you mean?" I exclaimed sharply.

"I mean that she ain't 'ere—ain't come back from Eastport. I drove 'er in yesterday morning and left 'er to do a bit o' shopping. Said she'd be 'ome by tea-time or soon after, but we waited and waited, and dang me if she ever turned up."

I felt a strange chill at my heart.

"And you've heard nothing of her?" I demanded.

"Not so much as a word. Can't make it out meself. Reckon she stayed the night with friends, but it's a queer thing she didn't take the trouble to ring us up." He glanced over his shoulder towards the house. "There's a telegram come for 'er, too: maybe——"

"I know what's in that," I interrupted. "I sent it off from London myself, yesterday afternoon." My voice sounded curiously hoarse, but by a big effort I managed to retain my self-control. "There's only one thing to do, Bassett," I continued. "I must go into Eastport at once and make inquiries."

He pushed back his hat, and scratched the top of his head. "It's getting you there that I'm thinking of, sir. The pony lost a shoe

yesterday, and I ain't had time yet to take 'im along to the blacksmith. Shall I hop round to the back and give a shout to that cabman o' yours? 'E can't 'ave got far, judging from what I see of 'is 'orse."

"No," I said, "it will be almost as quick to walk, and, besides, I'd like to ask some questions at the cottages along the road. If she started to come back, someone must have seen her."

"There ain't nothing could 'ave 'appened to 'er on the road," he objected, "not unless she got run over by one o' them dratted motor cars." He paused. "By the way, sir, there's a letter for you inside—come last night by the evening post."

He stepped in through the doorway, returning almost immediately with a large square envelope. As he handed it to me, I recognised Peter's writing, and, tearing open the flap, I hastily extracted its contents.

"The Grand Hotel,
"Birmingham,
"*June 26th.*

"MY DEAR JIM,—Frightfully sorry to have let you down, but you'll see what the trouble is by my address. I had to come to this cursed place to attend a conference, which has been fixed for to-morrow, and I'm afraid there is no chance of my being able to get away until the following day.

"It's very annoying, for if you're not pulling my leg I seem to be missing all sorts of fun. Why the devil couldn't you tell me a little more, instead of leaving me in this state of curiosity? Is there really some secret in connection with the cipher? Have you found out its meaning? Who broke your head, and where's he buried?

"Write to me at once directly you get this, or, better still, ring me up at the hotel. You can bet your boots that I'll be down at Bredbridge as soon as it's possible, so if you've anything on hand which requires courage and intelligence, try and put it off till I arrive.

"Love and a kiss to Jean.

"Yours ever,

"PETER."

"It's only a line from my friend Dr. West," I said. "He hopes to be back here Saturday or Sunday." I crumpled up the envelope and dropped it in the roadway. "I'm off now, Bassett," I added.

"Good luck to you, sir," he replied. "If you want any 'elp or advice when you get to Eastport, you call in at 'The Red Lion.' There ain't no one with a better 'ead on 'is shoulders not than Phil Roper."

I thanked him for the suggestion, and, still feeling half stupefied by the shock which his news had given me, I thrust the letter into my pocket and started off down the empty road.

It was not easy to think clearly, but somehow or other I forced myself to do it. If Medlicot were responsible for Jean's failure to return from Eastport, the need for swift and drastic action on my part was only too apparent. That it was he who had set fire to the Abbey I now felt convinced, and, with so fiendish a deed to his credit, was there any crime in the world of which such a man would not be capable?

The thought that Jean might be at his mercy filled me with an unspeakable dread. Apart from Jennifer, there was apparently no one except myself who had the smallest suspicion that this pleasant, easy-going country gentleman, with his passion for botany and sailing, was in reality a cunning and ruthless monster, who would not even stop at murder in order to gain his ends. Jennifer, for the moment, was hopelessly out of reach, and how could I—a stranger, and without a shred of evidence—expect that anyone in their senses would believe my unsupported statement?

All the same, if my inquiries proved fruitless, as it seemed only too likely they would, an appeal to the Eastport police was the one possible course open to me. Incredulous as they might be with regard to my theories, they would at least be bound to look into the question of Jean's disappearance. It promised, however, to be a desperately slow business, and, since the probability of some such investigation must certainly have occurred to Medlicot, could one cherish

the smallest hope that it would lead to any successful result?

I blamed myself bitterly for not having taken Jean up to Town with me on the previous day. After what had occurred, it had been sheer madness to leave her alone at Bredbridge, and the realisation of this fact, now that it was too late to be of use, only helped to add fuel to the misery and anxiety which I already felt.

A baby rabbit, scuttling across the road, brought me suddenly back to my immediate surroundings. I was approaching the corner where Medlicot had put me down on the night when we drove back from Eastport, and a little way ahead of me on the left the big iron gates of Bredbridge Hall were already visible amongst the trees.

As I drew nearer, it struck me for the first time that if Jean had really carried out her intention of walking home she would have been bound to pass within a few yards of this particular spot. There was a significance in the thought which set my pulses beating a shade faster, and, quickening my pace, I soon covered the remaining distance.

Mounted on two massive stone pillars, and flanked by an apparently uninhabited lodge, the main entrance to Bredbridge Hall stood back about thirty feet from the highway. It was approached by a narrow side-road which led straight up to the gates and then, taking a curve

to the right, wound away in the direction of the river. On one side of this road stretched a gloomy-looking wood, hedged in by an almost impenetrable screen of brambles and gorse. On the other rose a high stone wall, surmounted by broken glass, and from where I was standing, I could see the small side-door by which it was evidently Medlicot's custom to enter and leave the garden.

I was moving slowly towards the gates when my attention was attracted by the gleam of something white on the opposite side of the road. Wondering what it could be, I crossed over, and there, stained with earth and half trampled into the ground, lay a tiny handkerchief.

I stooped down and picked it up. It was a mere wisp of a thing—a fragile square of thin cambric with a narrow green border—but in one corner there was a little embroidered monogram which sent the blood drumming through my heart. It consisted of the two letters "J. F."

At the very moment that my eyes fell upon them a faint click suddenly reached my ears. With an involuntary start I glanced up, and, as I did so, the door in the wall was pushed open, and Medlicot himself stepped out into the sunshine.

Directly he saw me he came to an abrupt halt. For a second we stood there, looking at each other in silence; then, with a friendly

wave of the hand, he took a couple of paces towards me.

"Cameron!" he exclaimed. "Why, this is a pleasant surprise."

Clutching the handkerchief in my fingers, I walked towards him.

"Where's Jean?" I said.

"Jean!" he repeated, in a slightly puzzled tone. "What do you mean? Isn't she at the inn?"

I felt a mad anger surging up inside me as I stared back into his smiling, plausible face.

"You know where she is," I began hoarsely, "and if you don't tell me——"

In a flash his hand slid round to his hip pocket, but with a desperate spring I managed to grab hold of his wrist. There was a clink of metal in the roadway, and the next moment, locked in a furious grip, we were swaying and reeling backwards and forwards like a couple of drunken hooligans. At last, putting all my strength into one savage effort, I lifted him clean off his feet. For an instant he still struggled wildly, smashing at my face with his fists, then hurling him sideways to the ground, I dropped heavily on top of him.

"Speak—damn you!" I panted. "Tell me what you've done with her, or by the living God I'll kill you."

As I uttered the last word I was conscious of a rush of footsteps behind me. Something came

down with a stunning crash on the back of my head, and I lurched forward into utter blackness.

. . . . . .

For a little while I wondered vaguely what was the matter. I seemed to be lying in an extraordinarily cramped position, while my head felt as though it had been jammed into an iron ring which was at least three sizes too small to be really comfortable. It was dark, too, as dark as a dog's mouth, while for some mysterious reason I kept on sinking and rising in a fashion which threatened every moment to make me violently sick.

With a feeble effort I attempted to raise my arm, but, much to my surprise, it refused to move. I tried again, and then, stupid and half numbed as my brain was, I realised the truth. I was tied up, hand and foot, like a trussed chicken.

Suddenly, almost as if someone had jerked aside a curtain, my memory returned to me. Bassett and his news, the finding of Jean's handkerchief, my encounter with Medlicot—it all came flooding back into my mind in one blinding and overwhelming rush.

With my fists clenched, I lay staring into the darkness. From the moment when that stunning blow had crashed down on the back of my head, everything was a complete blank. Where was I, and what had happened? Why was the floor heaving up and down beneath me, and——

Good God! I was at sea!

How, even in my dazed condition, I had failed to grasp this perfectly obvious fact before, heaven alone knows! Of all sensations, that staggering jerk and half-protesting quiver were surely the most familiar, while with every plunge that we made I could hear faint muffled sounds above my head, such as the creak of rigging and the unmistakable swish of water.

It needed no particular intelligence to guess that I must be on board *The Flying Cloud*. She was evidently well out to sea, and punching her way into a stiff breeze, but how long I had been a prisoner, and where we were bound for, were questions to which at present it was impossible to find an answer. I only knew that I felt horribly ill, and that a black despair seemed to be creeping slowly through every fibre of my being.

It was not my own fate that I was concerned about; it was the thought that by my hot-headed blundering I had thrown away any chance that I might have had of rescuing Jean. We were both in Medlicot's power now, and, except for Jennifer and Peter, there was no one who would have the remotest suspicion of what had really happened to us. Jennifer was hundreds of miles away in the Pyrenees, while for all practical purposes Peter might just as well be with him. Even if he arrived at Bredbridge and learned of our disappearance, what could he do beyond communicating with the

police? He would have nothing to support his story but the vague hints contained in my letter, and to the stolid mind of an Eastport inspector such evidence would be more likely to arouse doubts as to my own sanity than to suggest the necessity for any immediate and effective action.

I was torturing myself with these unpleasant reflections when I suddenly heard the tread of approaching footsteps. The next moment the door opened somewhere behind me, letting in a faint gleam of light. Almost simultaneously came the scratch and splutter of a match, and, twisting round my head, I saw the spectacled face of Mr. Horace Medlicot peering down at me with a friendly smile.

"I hope I haven't disturbed you, Cameron," he remarked. "I should have liked you to have your sleep out, but unfortunately we are a little pressed for time."

He put a light to the small cabin lamp which was hanging from the ceiling, and, closing the door by which he had entered, seated himself on the opposite bunk. For a second or two he sat there contemplating me in silence.

"I don't want to appear inquisitive," he continued, "but, now that it's all over, I wonder if you would mind telling me how you came to attach such importance to those apparently meaningless letters?"

His question struck me like a blow in the face, for until that moment I had quite forgotten that

I had been carrying the cipher in my pocket. With an effort, however, I managed to force a laugh.

"So you've found it, have you?" I said. "Well, in that case I hope you're satisfied."

"Perfectly," was his reply. "All the same, before we drop you overboard, which I intend to do in about ten minutes' time, I should be interested to know why you chose to mix yourself up in this business."

He was watching my face closely as he spoke, but, if he were looking for any sign of weakness, I flatter myself that he was disappointed.

"You're not the only one who's anxious," I said. "Suppose you tell me something about yourself first. You're my host, and the least you can do is to try to be a little entertaining."

He smiled pleasantly. "My position is a very simple one. Some months ago I happened to come across an extremely valuable secret, which was quite useless to me without that illuminating message from Henry Franklyn. By the time I discovered the fact, the book in which it was written had passed into your hands. I made you a fair offer, which for some reason of your own you refused to accept. If you had only been a little more sensible, the unfortunate consequences to yourself and Jean——"

"Jean!" I interrupted involuntarily.

He shrugged his shoulders. "Surely that's

obvious. Since you chose to take the poor child into your confidence, it naturally follows that she will have to share your fate."

I looked at him for a moment almost incredulously.

"Are you mad?" I exclaimed. "Do you imagine that you can murder both of us without being found out?"

"I think it extremely probable," he answered. "Suppose we take your own case to begin with. No one saw you come to the Hall, and no one except Gull and Ben knows that you are on *The Flying Cloud*. In about a week, or perhaps a little sooner, your dead body will be washed up somewhere along the coast. There will be no marks of violence, the doctor who examines you will discover that you died by drowning, and the coroner's jury will doubtless add a rider expressing their sympathy with your relatives. As for our poor little friend Jean——"

"You devil!" I broke out. "If you touch a hair of Jean's head——"

He leaned back, laughing softly. "It's curious how melodramatic people become when their feelings are really excited. I presume that you're relying for vengeance upon your amiable sailing partner, but in that case it seems rather a pity that you weren't just a trifle more communicative. Judging by his letter, which I found in your pocket, you seem to have conducted your correspondence with what I can only describe as a truly admirable restraint."

I looked back into the mocking eyes that were staring into mine with a kind of merciless enjoyment.

"I suppose all murderers make the same mistake," I said quietly. "You may do what you threaten, but you'll be hanged for it, Medlicot, as certainly as the sun rises."

"Well, the sun will be rising in about a couple of hours," he replied, glancing at his watch. "I've no wish to hurry you, but, since we must obviously conduct our little ceremony in the dark, perhaps it would be as well if you began to say your prayers."

He got up from the bunk, and, opening the door which I could just see, beckoned silently along the passage. There was a shuffling sound outside, and the huge, distorted figure of the hunchback framed itself in the opening.

Medlicot pointed to me. "I don't know whether you can manage him by yourself, Ben, if not, I'll give you a hand."

Limping forward to where I was lying, the dumb monster grinned at me through his tangle of matted hair. Lower and lower he stooped, until I could feel his foul breath playing upon my face; then, without any apparent effort, he gripped me suddenly round the waist and hoisted me up over his shoulder.

"Be careful not to drop him," said Medlicot, "I don't want him to break his neck."

Head downwards, and as helpless as a sack

of flour, I was carried to the foot of the companion, where, steadying himself with one hand and clutching my legs with the other, the hunchback staggered slowly up into the night air. I just had time to feel the fresh wind and the sting of the spray on my face, and then, giddy and only half conscious of what was happening, I was dumped down unceremoniously on the wet deck.

"You must excuse the absence of a burial service," said Medlicot's voice. "I would have read it over you with pleasure, but unfortunately I shall be wanted at the tiller."

He moved away aft, and at the same moment a sudden lurch of the ship sent me rolling heavily into the lee scuppers. Everything was blotted out by a deluge of salt water, and when I opened my eyes again, choking and fighting for breath, I found myself looking up into the grim, bearded face of Captain Gull. He was bending down over me with a knife in his hands, sawing at my bonds.

"Brave work, isn't it?" I managed to gasp. "Especially for a sailor and an Englishman."

"What the hell d'you expect?" he muttered sullenly. "It's your life or mine."

He threw off the severed rope from my arms which the hunchback immediately grabbed hold of, and then, with a couple of quick strokes, slashed through the cord that fastened my ankles.

"Over with 'im," he growled.

Struggling and kicking, I was hoisted up from the deck, a rough heave sent me sprawling into the air, and down I went with a violent splash into the cold, inky waters of the North Sea.

CHAPTER XVI

DRASTIC as the treatment may appear there are few things more bracing to a man's system than being flung overboard in the middle of the night. That sudden chilling plunge acted on me like a tonic, and, although I was unable to save myself from going under, a couple of vigorous kicks brought me promptly to the surface.

Treading water desperately, I looked round for *The Flying Cloud.* She was already some distance away, her big mainsail rising and vanishing against the sky as the swell of the sea lifted me up and down. Once or twice I caught the red flash of her port light, which blinked out at me through the darkness like the gleam of an evil eye.

I should have liked to shout a farewell curse after her, but unfortunately I had no breath to spare. Fully dressed as I was, it already needed the whole of my energies to keep myself afloat, and I realised that, unless I could get rid

of some of my clothes, the struggle was likely to be a brief one.

Disrobing in the water, however, as I soon discovered, is a job which requires considerable practice. It is by no means easy even to unfasten and pull off one's shoes without committing suicide, while the still more appalling difficulties of struggling out of a wet coat can only be appreciated by one who has actually attempted the feat.

By the time, indeed, that I had got as far as this I was too exhausted to worry about my other garments. The odds against me were in any case overwhelming, and I saw no point in being ignominiously drowned while wrestling vainly with a pair of refractory trousers.

Turning on my back and paddling with my hands, I gulped in two or three welcome draughts of fresh air. According to Dr. Johnson, the near approach of death has a wonderfully clearing effect upon a man's mind, and, if my personal experience is of any value, I can testify to the truth of this statement. Lying there in the darkness, my eyes half closed to keep out the stinging spray, I was able to review the whole of my disastrous blundering with an extraordinary and pitiless lucidity.

Nothing seemed to be wanting that could add to the bitterness of death. Not only had I thrown away my own life, but in so doing I had condemned Jean to a similar and perhaps even a worse fate. That Medlicot would have

the smallest compunction about carrying out his threat it was idle even to imagine. I was convinced now that we were dealing with a man who was morally insane—a man who combined the callousness of a fiend with all the plausibility and cunning of a well-educated criminal. Having stumbled across a valuable secret at the very moment when he was desperately in need of money, he had set himself to track down the missing clue, no matter what crime or violence it might be necessary to employ. Now that the prize was actually in his grasp, was he likely to falter at one more piece of devilry? He regarded Jean as the only remaining source of danger, and he would silence her just as ruthlessly as he had silenced me.

Whichever way I looked, the end seemed inevitable. Neither Peter nor the inspector would arrive in time to interfere, while as for Gull and his half-witted ape of a son, both were evidently mere tools, utterly in the hands of a stronger and more evil nature than their own.

In the bitterness of my soul I was half tempted to give up the useless struggle. What was the good of staving off death a little longer merely to be tortured by the fierce misery of my own thoughts? I had only to cease swimming, and the weight of my clothes would immediately drag me under. There would be a minute of black, suffocating agony, and then——

A great heap of water surged past me, tossing

me up like a cork on top of its broken crest. Through the spray and the darkness I caught a momentary glimpse of a big, conical-shaped object looming out in the distance ahead of me, and, half choked as I was, an involuntary cry broke from my lips. It was a cage buoy, one of those floating Trinity House sentinels which mark the presence of some lonely and dangerous shoal.

How far away it might be I had no time to judge, but the sight of its tall framework, bobbing about amongst the waves, sent a wild thrill of hope racing through my heart. I realised that if I could only get alongside and find something to cling to, there would still be a faint chance of life, and, with my teeth set, I struck out desperately towards it.

That swim has always stayed in my mind like the memory of some hideous nightmare. Hampered by my clothes, and drenched and buffeted by the breaking seas, I fought my way on with the blind instinct of a drowning animal. One thing alone was in my favour, and that was the set of the tide. It was making steadily in the direction of the sands, and every time that a wave lifted me up and the buoy again swung in view, I could see that its gaunt outline was drawing nearer and nearer.

How I managed to reach it, however, is a question which only my guardian angel can answer. After being tied up for nearly twenty-four hours with nothing to eat or drink, I had

about as much strength left as a rather debilitated kitten. My head ached as though it would burst; my legs and arms seemed to be made of lead; while so rough was the sea that, except for an occasional gasping sob, I was practically unable to get my breath.

For the last twenty or thirty yards I must have been almost unconscious. I have a vague recollection of seeing the great curve of the cylinder heaving up and down in front of me, and hearing the moan of the wind as it whistled through the bars. Then, just as I could struggle no longer, something hard bumped up against my shoulder, and I found myself clinging frantically to a slimy iron ring, with long trailers of wet seaweed flopping about my face.

I was saved for the moment, but, even so, it was a precarious enough refuge. Every time a wave broke against the side the water splashed up over my head, while with each swing of the buoy my numbed fingers seemed on the very point of letting go their hold. I saw that, unless I was able to reach the iron cage above, nothing could save me from being swept away and drowned, and with that grim knowledge came a last desperate flicker of energy and strength.

Seizing my chance as the next wave jerked me forward, I let go of the ring with one hand and grabbed hold of the bottom bar. My arm felt as though it were being dragged out of its socket, but inch by inch I managed to haul

myself up until the whole upper part of my body was resting on top of the cylinder.

By the mercy of God there was just room enough to squeeze in between the curved iron stays. I can remember crawling through and sliding with a violent bang against the opposite side; and then I suppose I must have fainted.

. . . . . .

The first thing of which I was conscious was a smell of fish. It was one of those rich, overpowering odours that seem to permeate the whole of one's being, and, opening my eyes a little resentfully, I looked round to discover its source.

I found myself staring at the back of a half-naked boy, who was bending over an oil-stove on which boiled and bubbled an enormous pot.

"Hullo!" I said feebly. "Where the devil am I?"

At the sound of my voice he spun round sharply. He was a shock-headed, sunburned youth of about sixteen, and for a moment he appeared so surprised at my question that he could only stand and gape at me in silence.

Then, dropping the long metal spoon which he was holding in his hand, he suddenly vanished.

"Dad!" I heard him shout. "Dad! 'E's woke up!"

Slightly staggered by the unexpectedness of the whole affair, I made another survey of my surroundings.

My last impression had been one of slithering helplessly against the iron cage-work of the buoy, and now, so far as I could see, I was being tossed about with considerable vigour in the hold of a small fishing-smack. The brilliant if perhaps somewhat belated inference that I must have been rescued was just beginning to dawn upon me, when a pair of sea-boots appeared at the head of the companion-ladder, and a stout, grey-bearded figure in dripping oilskins ducked in under the doorway. He was a typical East Coast skipper —an elderly, broad-shouldered man with a mahogany-coloured face and a pair of twinkling blue eyes.

"Hullo, mate," he observed. "Found your voice, so they tell me!" He came across to the foot of the rough mattress on which I was lying and plumped himself down beside me on a large wooden box. "Take it easy," he added as I made an effort to sit up. "There's no call for you to start talking now if you don't feel ready for it."

"What ship's this?" I asked. "And how did I get here!"

"The *Daisy Bell* o' Harwich," was his answer. "We picked you up at six o'clock this morning, and a rare job we had to get you aboard. On top o' the West Spits Buoy—that's where you were—inside o' the cage and floppin' about like a flounder."

"Thank you very much," I said. "It sounds to me as if you'd saved my life."

He smiled slowly. "Well, I reckon you'd had a bellyful by the time we got you off. Thought you were a goner at first, and my mate Joe, who's got quare notions about corpses, he was all for pushing along somewhere else and pretending we hadn't seen you. Howsoever, I'm skipper o' this craft, and, being a Christian man meself, I don't hold with such foolishness. Besides, as soon as I come to have a look at you, I guessed that all you wanted was a lay down by the stove and something to warm you up. So we took off your wet clothes, and shoved a good tot o' rum down your neck, and here you been ever since, sleeping like a log." He pulled out a stump of clay pipe from his pocket and rammed home its contents with his thumb. "Amachoor, ain't you?" he added, eyeing me shrewdly. "Out on your own, as like as not, and fell overboard in the dark?"

For a second I hesitated. He seemed a decent enough chap, but, all the same, I was not sure that it would be wise to take him into my confidence. If I told him the truth he would probably think that I was lying, or else that my enforced sojourn in the North Sea had temporarily affected my brain. In either case he would be bound to regard me with a certain amount of distrust, and, since my one object was to persuade him to take me back to Eastport as quickly as possible, I was particularly anxious not to arouse any such impression.

"You've got it, skipper," I said, with what I intended to sound like a rather forced laugh. "I went over, right enough, and it was an extraordinary bit of luck running across that buoy. I deserved to be drowned for being such a clumsy idiot."

"Who are you, mister," he asked, "and where do you come from?"

"My name's Cameron," I said. "I live in London, and I'm spending a holiday at Bredbridge. I've some friends there who are probably worrying themselves stiff about me. I don't know where we are, but if by any chance you could put me ashore at Eastport, I'll be more than pleased to make it worth your while. Of course, apart from that, I owe you a hell of a lot already."

He contemplated me for a moment with an obviously increased interest.

"Well, sir," he said, "to speak plain, I should be losing money by putting in at Eastport. I've a contract for shrimps with a party at Harwich, and seeing as we've got a good catch on board——"

"You needn't worry about that," I interrupted. "There's a couple of hundred pounds waiting you as soon as we get ashore, and if you'll do what I ask, I'll make it two-fifty."

He drew in a long breath. "Two hundred and fifty quid," he repeated slowly. "Did I hear you correct?"

"Perfectly," I replied. "Of course, you'll have to take my word for it; all the money I had on me is at the bottom of the sea."

There was a brief pause, and then, with a sudden resounding slap, he brought his hand down upon his thigh.

"That's good enough for me," he exclaimed. "I know a gentleman when I'm talking to one, and if it's Eastport you want, why to Eastport you shall go." He produced a box of matches from his trouser pocket and proceeded to ignite his pipe. "It'll be a dead beat most of the way," he continued, sucking vigorously as he spoke. "All the same, if it don't get no worse we ought to be there by dark."

"By dark!" I echoed. "Why, what's the time now?"

"Just gone seven," was his answer. "Twelve hours you been lying there, mister, and I reckon you're about ready for something to eat."

He rose from the box, and, with an effort which sent a sudden stab of pain all through me, I struggled into a sitting position. It was an undeniable fact that my inside felt extraordinarily hollow.

"I could do with a cup of tea and a bit of grub," I admitted. "I don't want to be a nuisance, though, not if you're short-handed."

"That's all right," he returned. "You stop where you are and I'll send the boy down to

get it for you. We got a nice piece of 'am in the fo'c'sle, and if you're partial to shrimps, why, just you step in and 'elp yourself."

He nodded encouragingly, and, making his way out through the narrow doorway and up the companion, left me to my reflections.

That they were far from enviable it is, perhaps, needless to state. Although I had escaped death by a miracle, the hideous fear that I should be too late to save Jean was hammering and clutching at my heart. Medlicot had probably got back into the river shortly after daybreak, and, even if she were alive then, he had had ample time since to carry out his fiendish purpose. If it were so, there was one thing—and one thing only—for which I wished to live. Mad or sane, I would kill Medlicot myself. I would find him before the police or anyone else could interfere, and, no matter what they might do to me afterwards, I would rid the world of his foul and evil presence.

Sick and shaken by the violence of my own emotions, I sank back on the mattress. I could hear the boy moving about in the fo'c'sle, and I could also catch a faint rumble of voices from the deck, where the skipper was presumably bringing to his mate's notice the practical advantages of a Christian upbringing. I had no doubt that, inspired by the reward which I had promised him, he was already heading for Eastport as fast as the weather would permit, and with a vague uneasiness I began to wonder

what sort of a condition I should be in when the time came for me to step ashore.

As a result of one or two tentative movements, I felt distinctly encouraged. Painful as they were, they satisfied me that, apart from bruises, stiffness, and general exhaustion, there was nothing very serious the matter with me. I was certainly a bit faint from want of food, and when I came to undo the rough shirt and trousers which I was wearing, I found that I was black and blue all over, where I had been banged about against the iron cage. These, however, were, so to speak, temporary afflictions, and I was inclined to think that, after a good meal and another two or three hours' rest, I should be quite up to tackling any part which I might be called upon to play.

The meal arrived within a few minutes—brought in by the shock-headed and friendly looking boy whom I had last seen bending over the stove. We had a short chat, in the course of which I discovered that his name was Tom Cattermole, and that his father, the skipper, who hailed from West Mersea, owned a half-share in the boat with another local fisherman. He seemed a good lad, and, before departing, he insisted on presenting me with a packet of Woodbines which he produced from his hip pocket. They were a bit crumpled, and had a slight flavour of shrimps, but, after a day and a half without tobacco, my appreciation of the gift was in no way impaired by such trifles.

Next to food, cigarettes were what I most craved for, and, when I had done full justice to the ham and bread, I lay on my back and smoked one after another of them with the utmost gratitude.

Just as I was lighting the last my young benefactor returned. He grinned sympathetically at the sight of my empty plate, and, having cleared away the débris, resumed his interrupted task of ladling out the shrimps, which he deposited carefully in a couple of large wicker baskets.

By the time these were full the food which I had eaten was beginning to produce its effect. I could feel a pleasant glow of warmth and comfort stealing gradually through my bruised carcase, and, realising that the sooner I made a move the better, I roused myself to a fresh effort.

"What's happened to my clothes, Tom?" I asked. "I suppose they're still kicking about somewhere."

"They're quite safe, mister," was his answer. "I wrung the water out of 'em and hung 'em up here behind the stove. Reckon they ought to be about dry by now."

He stepped across to examine them, and, scrambling shakily to my feet, I limped over to where he was standing.

"Well, I may as well put them on," I said, finding that his prophecy was more or less correct, "I don't know whether you could dig me out

a pair of shoes from anywhere; I left mine as a keepsake for the fishes."

"There's an old pair of Joe's in the fo'c'sle," he answered. "He won't mind lending you them—not if you slip 'im a pint when we get ashore."

"That sounds fair," I admitted, and, seating myself gingerly on a neighbouring locker, I proceeded, by painful stages, to struggle back into my dilapidated garments.

When I got up, after completing the process, I happened to catch sight of myself in a tiny cheap mirror which was nailed to the after-bulkhead. My appearance gave me a bit of a shock, for, with my limp, bedraggled collar and two days' growth of beard, I certainly looked about as undesirable a castaway as anyone had ever pulled in out of the sea. That the skipper should have accepted my promises in good faith struck me as amazing, and it was with a considerably increased sense of obligation that I made my way towards the companion, and somewhat unsteadily clambered up on deck.

We were thrashing to windward under a mainsail and jib, with the grey outline of the coast about two miles distant. In the failing light I could just make out the tall spire of Eastport Church, and a queer thrill went through me as, away to the north, I recognised the rounded cliff and desolate fir-trees which marked the entrance to the Bredbridge river.

The skipper, who was in charge of the helm, greeted me with an approving nod.

"That's better," he observed. "Come up to have a breath o' fresh air, eh?"

"I came up to see how we were getting on," I explained. "I had enough fresh air on that damned buoy to last me the rest of my life."

He chuckled genially. "It won't do you no harm. You take another tot o' rum when you get back and then turn in quick. The only thing you need's a good comfortable bed."

Not being able to explain to him that I had other and more urgent engagements on hand, I relapsed into silence. I had already decided in my own mind exactly what I intended to do. The moment I landed I would get hold of a taxi or car and drive straight to "The Green Man." If I found Peter there, so much the better, but, if not, I felt sure that as soon as Sam Bassett had heard my story I could count upon all the assistance I wanted without troubling the Eastport police. Everyone in Bredbridge knew and loved Jean, and when they heard what had happened to her, there was not a man in the place who would not be ready and eager to follow me to the Hall.

With clenched hands I stood staring across the water as, with every other tack, we drew nearer and nearer to the shore. I was in no mood for talking, and, since both the skipper and his taciturn-looking mate were both fully

occupied in working the boat, conversation was fortunately not expected of me. I was able to brood undisturbed over my own thoughts until the tide carried us in between the stone piles of the harbour, and the old quay, with its friendly lamps and tumble-down houses, opened out cheerfully about us.

We picked up some moorings astern of a Leigh bawley, and, leaving the others to stow the sails, the skipper came across to where I was standing.

"There's one little matter I been thinking of," he remarked. "Don't know whether you've any friends in the place, mister, but, if not, maybe a ten bob note would come in handy. You won't find no one to take you out to Bredbridge at this time o' night—not for less than that."

"It's uncommonly kind of you, skipper," I said gratefully. "There aren't many people about who would take a man on trust in the way you've done."

"I was always one for using me own judgment," he replied, "whether it's a matter of shrimps, or whether it's a matter o' two hundred and fifty quid."

"You turn up at 'The Red Lion' at one o'clock to-morrow," I said. "If I'm not there, the cheque will be."

He shook my hand warmly, and, diving into his pocket, handed me the note.

"Well, I ain't goin' to take the chance of no more accidents," he observed. "Just wait here

till I get the dinghy round, and I'll run you ashore meself."

Ten minutes later, under the curious eyes of a solitary night watchman, I wished him good-bye and clambered up on to the jetty. It was a quarter past ten by the harbour clock, and, picking my way between piles of empty fish-baskets, I crossed the cobbled roadway and paused for a moment on the opposite pavement.

A few yards away stood a two-seater Ford, the owner of which—a stout gentleman in leather gaiters—was wrestling violently with the starting-handle. I walked towards him, and, hearing my steps, he paused from his labours and raised a flushed, inquiring face.

"Sorry to interrupt you," I said, "but do you happen to know where I could hire a car?

He looked me up and down as though somewhat surprised at my question.

"A car!" he repeated. "What sort of a car?"

"Any sort," I replied. "I only want to go to Bredbridge. I've been out sailing for a couple of days, and I don't feel like walking all the way back."

His expression, which had been a trifle dubious, suddenly cleared. "I can give you a lift to Bredbridge—leastways, I can take you as far as Platt's corner, which is only about half a mile from the bridge. I'll have to drop you there, because I'm none too sure about my lamps."

"That will do me fine," I said.

He applied himself once more to the starting-handle, and with a loud, protesting splutter, the engine burst into motion.

"Jump in quick!" he shouted. "She generally stops again if we don't get going at once."

I scrambled hastily to my seat, and the next minute we had swung our way round the corner and were clattering northwards through the deserted market-place.

As I expected from his appearance, my companion turned out to be a local farmer. He was evidently well acquainted with the neighbourhood, and I couldn't help wondering what his comments would be if he had the faintest suspicion of the drama in which he was assisting. Placidly unconscious, however, he was content to beguile the journey in giving me his views on the iniquity of importing Colonial bacon, a subject which occupied him, without intermission, until he drew up abruptly at the entrance to a narrow lane.

"We'll have to part comp'ny here," he announced, "or else I'll be getting into trouble. You ain't far to go, though, not when you're round the next corner. That's Bredbridge Hall, just ahead on your right."

I thanked him heartily for his kindness, and, expressing a hope that I should see him again before long at "The Green Man," started off up the road.

A few minutes' walk brought me to the lodge gates. Just visible in the darkness, they had a

curiously sinister and lonely aspect, and the sight of them filled me with a sudden insane longing to force my way into the house there and then. Ready as I was, however, for any desperate enterprise, I realised that, without help, such an attempt would be worse than useless. Even if I succeeded in gaining admission, it was quite likely that I should have to encounter both Gull and the hunchback. Either of them would be more than a match for me in my present state, while, at the first warning that his plans had miscarried, Medlicot would doubtless vanish into hiding long before the police had any chance of arresting him.

Crushing back the wild impulse which had so nearly overcome me, I hurried forward between the straggling hedges. My legs still felt queer and stiff, and once or twice I stumbled so awkwardly in the darkness that I as nearly as possible measured my length in the road. At last, however, after what seemed an interminable distance, I arrived at the narrow gap which led through to the hard, and, pulling up instinctively, I stared out across the saltings in search of *The Skylark*.

As I did so, my heart gave a sudden jump. There she lay, still and solitary in the tideway, with a yellow haze of light shining through her cabin-top.

MUCH as I had hoped that Peter had been able to get back, the sight of that friendly gleam seemed almost too good to be true. In an instant all thought of going on to "The Green Man" vanished from my mind, and with an indescribable sense of thankfulness I turned in through the opening.

Making my way as quickly as I dared along the treacherous winding path, I came out amongst the bed of rushes which fringed the top of the hard. With eager haste I blundered through these, and then, just as I was collecting my breath for a hail, I caught sight of a dark object looming up between me and the water. It was my own dinghy, lying sideways on the shingle.

For a moment I stood gazing at it half incredulously. If Peter were on board, what the devil was the boat doing here? It was a problem which certainly presented some difficulty, and, filled by a sudden uneasy doubt, I stepped forward to make a closer examination.

Even in the dark I could tell at once that she must have been there for several tides. There was a puddle of rainwater collected in the stern, and so deeply had her anchor bitten into the ground that I had to give two or three vigorous tugs before I was able to release it.

Once again I paused to look at the light.

Whoever was making free with my cabin apparently had no wish to conceal the fact. One could scarcely imagine that anybody who was up to mischief would have been foolish enough to betray his presence in such an obvious fashion, and, with a renewed conviction that it must be either Peter or Sam Bassett, I took hold of the dinghy's gunwale, and with some difficulty dragged her down to the water.

As I pulled out into the tide, I kept looking round over my shoulder, expecting every moment to see a familiar form pop up through the hatch. Nothing of the sort happened, however, and coming alongside more puzzled than ever, I shipped my sculls and scrambled quickly on board.

"Is that you, Peter?" I called out.

There was no answer.

With a swift turn I hitched up the painter and stepped forward to the head of the companion. Through the open space below, a flood of light streamed out into the after-cabin, but, except for the sound of my own breathing, everything was as quiet as the grave.

I hesitated for an instant, and then, gripping the sides of the hatch with both hands, I swung myself down. As my feet touched the boards there was a faint movement inside the cabin. The next moment I was standing rigid and motionless in the doorway, staring at a slim, boyish, tousle-headed figure which had just started up from the left-hand bunk.

"Jean!" I gasped.

With a low, broken cry she stretched out her hands towards me.

"Oh, my dear," I said stupidly, and, as the words left my lips, I found myself kneeling in front of her, with her cheek against mine and her little slender body hugged tightly in my arms.

"My precious darling," I whispered. "I thought you were dead."

She stroked my hair, laughing softly and happily.

"I shall be soon, Jim," she said, "if you squeeze me any harder."

I released my grip—just a trifle.

"Where have you been?" I demanded. "And how on earth did you get here?" I paused abruptly. "Why, good Lord!" I added. "That's my jersey and trousers you're wearing!"

"You don't mind, do you?" she answered. "I had to put on something, and these were all I could find."

I struggled up on to the bunk, and, seating myself beside her, slipped my arm tenderly round her waist.

"We're beginning at the wrong end," I observed. "Let's go right back to when you were coming home from Eastport and met Medlicot outside the lodge."

She looked up at me in a kind of startled wonder. "How do you know?" she asked.

"I'll tell you in a minute," I replied. "I want to hear your story first."

Her fingers, which were clasping mine, suddenly tightened their hold.

"It must have been just about five, or a little after," she said. "I was in rather a hurry, because I'd told Sam I would be back to tea, and I was afraid they might be waiting for me. When I came round the corner, Medlicot was standing at the lodge gates. I don't think I'm really a coward, Jim, but somehow or other I felt horribly frightened, meeting him like that, all alone."

"Well, considering that he'd just tried to burn you to death," I said, "I'm not altogether surprised."

"I'd no chance of getting past him," she continued. "Directly he saw me he stepped out into the road, and of course I had to stop and shake hands. He asked me what I'd been doing and where you were, and then he suggested that, instead of going on to the inn, I should come and have tea on *The Flying Cloud*. When I told him I couldn't, he suddenly gave a whistle, and, before I'd time to move, Ben jumped out of the wood behind me and picked me up in his arms. I couldn't even scream, because he put his hand over my mouth."

"I hope you bit him," I said savagely.

"Of course I did. I bit him so hard that the blood trickled all over my face, but even then he wouldn't let go. He carried me through the

garden and down into a cellar under the house. It's a horrible place, with a stone floor and a nasty mouldy sort of smell, and, after I'd been there for a little while, Medlicot came in and began to ask me questions."

"About the cipher?" I demanded.

She nodded. "He wanted to know where you'd hidden it. He said that unless I told him he would shut me up in the old watch-tower at the end of the groyne and leave me there to starve to death."

By a great effort I managed to repress a somewhat unsuitable oath.

"What did you say?" I asked.

"I said just what you did to Mr. Skinner. I told him to go to hell."

There was a brief pause.

"By Jove, Jean," I said slowly, "I don't know where you keep it, but you've got the heart of a lion."

She laughed. "I didn't feel like a lion; I felt more like a rabbit in a trap. You see, I know the tower; I landed there once from a boat. It's a frightfully lonely place, and, as the groyne's all broken down, there's no way of reaching it except by the sea. You could stop there for ever unless somebody came to look for you."

"Well, what happened?" I asked.

"I was left alone in the dark for a long time —a couple of hours, I should think, and then Medlicot came back with a glass of milk and

some biscuits. He said he would give me until midnight to think it over, and that if I hadn't changed my mind by then I must put up with the consequences. I suppose it was stupid of me, but I never thought about there being anything wrong with the milk. I was so thirsty and tired that as soon as he'd gone I drank the whole lot of it straight away."

"It was drugged?"

"Must have been," she said calmly. "Anyhow, I don't remember another thing until I woke up and found myself in the tower."

She gave a little shiver, and I drew her still closer.

"Oh, Jim, it was horrible. I felt so ill, and there I was lying on the wet stones, with two or three enormous great crabs crawling about just beside me. I suppose they'd have begun eating me if I'd been unconscious much longer. I could hear the sea pounding and smashing on the groyne outside, and every time there was a particularly big wave the water came spurting in under the door. I tried to move farther away from it, and directly I did I started being sick. I was terribly sick, Jim, but after a little it seemed to do me good. Anyhow, I managed to get up and have a look round."

"What—in the dark?" I exclaimed.

She shook her head. "It wasn't dark at all. There's a big hole in the west side of the tower, right up under the roof, and the sun was shining in and lighting up the whole place. Of course,

it didn't take me long to guess what had happened. Somebody must have carried me inside while I was drugged and dumped me down on the floor, and I'd evidently been lying there all day."

I gave her a comforting hug. "Go on, Jean," I said.

"Well, to start with, everything seemed utterly hopeless. I couldn't see any way of getting out except by the door, and that was about a foot thick and made of solid oak. I wrenched and pulled at it until my arms ached so fearfully that I just sat down on the floor amongst the crabs and began to cry. Then, all of a sudden, I saw the hook."

"Saw the what?" I demanded.

"The hook. A great big iron hook sticking out of the wall exactly below the hole. It was a long way up, of course, but, all the same, I suddenly got an idea that if I tore up my clothes and made a kind of rope of them, I might be able to tie a weight to one end and throw it up so that it would catch and hold." She paused.

"The trouble was," she continued, "that I hadn't a pair of scissors, or even a pocket-knife. I had to do it all with my own teeth and my fingers, and, oh, Jim, you don't know how difficult it is biting through a serge skirt."

"I've never tried," I admitted, "but it certainly sounds a tough job."

"I managed it, however," she went on triumphantly. "I tore the whole lot into strips

and fastened them together. It was as much as I could do to make the rope long enough, because, you see, I don't wear very many clothes. In the end I had to take off everything."

"Everything!" I echoed.

She nodded. "Yes," she said, "even my stockings. You wouldn't have had me killed just for the sake of being a little more respectable?"

"Heaven forbid!" I said fervently.

"The only thing I could use as a weight were my shoes. I stuffed a stone into each of the toes and tied them on to the end, and then I started trying to throw them up so that they'd catch on the hook. I don't know how many times I missed—dozens and dozens, I should think—but I wasn't going to be beaten, and at last I managed to make a good shot. They stuck there anyhow, and that was the best I could hope for."

I stared at her for a moment in a sort of fascinated admiration. "Do you mean to tell me that you climbed up and got through the hole?"

"Of course I did," she said simply. "I shouldn t be here otherwise.

I drew in a deep breath. "And you jumped down from there—jumped down into that ghastly tide rip?"

"Well, I had to! I couldn't sit on the top with nothing on, waiting for somebody to come along in an aeroplane."

"Holy saints!" I ejaculated helplessly.

"Oh, it wasn't really as bad as it sounds. I did come down with a bit of a bang, but, luckily for me, I just missed the groyne. Once I was in the water I was perfectly all right. There was a tremendous tide running, and I'd simply got to lie on my back and let it carry me along upstream. You see, there was only one place I could make for, and that was *The Skylark*."

"But it's a couple of miles down to the tower!" I exclaimed.

"More than that," she said. "All the same, what else could I do? I'm not fussy, Jim, but one can't run about the country stark naked." She paused. "It was getting past *The Flying Cloud* that was the worst part. I was so afraid someone would see me, and I nearly suffocated myself trying to keep under water. After that everything seems a bit vague. I've a kind of dim recollection of climbing on board and finding it all dark and empty. I felt that perhaps it was foolish to light the lamps, but I was too tired to bother. I just crawled into these things and flopped down on to the bunk, and then I don't remember anything until I heard your voice and saw you standing in the doorway."

She gave a faint, happy little sigh, and rested her head against my shoulder.

"But, good Lord, you must be half starving!" I cried. "Haven't you had any food since you left Eastport?"

"Only those biscuits," she said, "and I don't think there can be much of them left."

I jumped up, and, lifting her gently in my arms, propped her against the bunk cushions.

"You lie there," I said sternly, "and don't you try to move or speak again until you've got something inside you."

She contented herself with an obedient smile, and, diving through into the fo'c'sle, I began to rummage hastily amongst our stores. There was one bottle of sparkling Moselle left, and this, together with a stale loaf, a sheep's tongue, and a pot of strawberry jam, I carried back into the cabin. It was not perhaps exactly the diet which a doctor would have prescribed, but Jean was evidently one of those patients who respond to exceptional treatment. Anyhow, she fell to with encouraging avidity, and in a very few minutes a tinge of colour began to steal back into her lips and cheeks.

"I'm feeling much better now," she said, as I refilled her glass. "Do please tell me about yourself and what you've been doing. You look frightfully tired and ill—and oh, Jim dear, you haven't shaved for at least two days."

I seated myself on the foot of the bunk.

"I haven't had the chance," I explained. "My adventures seem a bit tame compared with yours, but, all the same, I've been quite busy in my own little way."

She helped herself to some more strawberry

jam. "Go on, Jim," she said. "I can eat and listen at the same time."

Beginning at my interview with Jennifer, and without making any attempt to excuse my stupidity, I proceeded, as briefly as I could, to describe the somewhat unexpected events which had followed upon my return to Bredbridge. It must have taken me a good quarter of an hour to complete my story, and long before I arrived at the end she had pushed aside the tray, and was leaning forward on both elbows, staring up at my face with rapt attention.

"The fact is," I concluded bitterly, "that I've messed up the whole business. If I'd only had the sense to take Jennifer's advice——"

"Oh, but you mustn't talk like that," she broke in. "It wasn't your fault, Jim, not the least little bit in the world; you did everything you possibly could, and——"

"It's the cipher I'm thinking of," I interrupted. "Whatever the secret is, Medlicot must have got hold of it by now."

"I don't care," she declared almost passionately. "I'm so happy at having you back safe." She stopped dead, and, with a sudden instinctive movement, we both started up, tense and breathless.

"Jim!" she whispered. "Did you hear?"

"It's Peter!" I shouted wildly. "Peter, by the living jingo!"

I sprang towards the doorway, and, with Jean following, scrambled up the companion.

There on the hard stood two figures, the moon, which had just peeped out from behind a bank of cloud, lighting them up as clearly as though it were daytime.

I felt Jean's hand clutching at my arm.

"Who's that with him?"

"It's Jennifer," I gasped. "Jennifer, the inspector."

As I spoke, Peter's voice came cheerfully across the water.

"Don't be frightened. It's only a few friends."

I made a dive for the cleat to which I had hitched the dinghy's painter.

"Will you come too?" I asked.

She shook her head. "No," she said, "I'm going to brush my hair. I shouldn't like the inspector to think that you were mad."

I jumped down, nearly capsizing the boat in my eagerness, and the next moment I was pulling joyously for the shore. I had much the same emotion as Wellington must have felt at Waterloo when the advance guard of the Prussians suddenly appeared through the smoke.

"Good Lord, but I'm glad to see you, Peter," I panted, as he grabbed hold of the gunwale and dragged me up the beach.

"You can't be more glad than we are," was his answer. "If you knew——" He paused abruptly. "My sainted aunt!" he added. "What on earth have you been doing to yourself?"

I stumbled to my feet, and, stepping out a little dizzily, gripped their hands in turn.

"You must excuse our appearance," I said. "We've been having rather a busy day—Jean and I."

"Well, thank God you're both safe, anyhow," broke in the inspector. "I can tell you this, Mr. Cameron: it was a rare weight off my mind when I saw the pair of you on deck."

"I could hardly believe my own eyes," I returned. "I thought you were in Spain."

He smiled drily. "So I was this morning. I reached Croydon by air at six o'clock to-night. It's going to cost you a tidy sum, this little jaunt of mine, but you won't grudge the money, not when you know the result."

"Trot it out, for heaven's sake," I implored him. "A bit of good news is exactly what I'm looking for."

"That will keep for a few minutes," was his reply. "The first thing I want to hear is what you and this young lady have been up to. I gathered from Dr. West that you've been getting yourselves into some pretty bad trouble."

"I rang up 'The Green Man' from Birmingham this morning," explained Peter. "The old sport there seemed to be in a hell of a way. He said you and Jean had both vanished, and that if someone didn't show up soon he was going to send for the police."

"I'll tell you all about it quick enough," I

said, "but let's get back on board before we start trying to explain."

The inspector shook his head. "I'd rather hear it at once, Mr. Cameron."

"Just as you please," I said, seating myself on the edge of the boat. "You'll probably think I've gone mad, but for the love of Mike don't interrupt."

Perched there, with an enthralled audience on each side of me, I gave them a brief but faithful account of the staggering experiences from which Jean and I had recently emerged. To do them justice, I must admit that they both observed my request with extraordinary faithfulness, for from the first word to the last neither of them interjected a syllable.

"I know it sounds as if I were suffering from D.T.," I finished a little apologetically. "All the same, whether you can swallow it or not that's the truth." I turned to the inspector. "You told me that this was going to be rather an unusual case, Mr. Jennifer, and for once at least in your life you certainly made a damned good prophecy."

There was a moment of profound silence.

"By gad!" said Peter slowly. "When I get my hands on that fat-faced skunk——"

"It's no use standing here talking," cut in the inspector brusquely. "We'd better go on board, as you suggest, Mr. Cameron. This job's going to be even bigger than I expected. I'll give you and Miss Franklyn my report, and

then we can decide what's the best thing to do."

I jumped from my seat, and, dragging the dinghy down into the water, we all three scrambled in over the side. Peter, who was first, took the sculls, and, with the inspector sitting grim and silent on the opposite thwart, we rapidly covered the short distance that separated us from *The Skylark*.

"Jean's brushing her hair," I explained, as I led the way on board. "It's in your honour, Jennifer, so I hope you feel properly flattered."

They followed me down to the cabin, where, during my brief absence, some sound work had apparently been accomplished. The disordered bunk was now tidy, whisky and glasses had been set out on the table, and Jean herself, looking extraordinarily fresh and radiant, was just emerging from the fo'c'sle with a syphon in each hand.

"Oh, Peter!" she said joyously, and, dumping her burdens on the floor, she darted forward to greet him.

"You can kiss him if you want to, Jean," I said. "I'm not small-minded about trifles like that."

Peter, who had not even waited for my permission, stepped back, holding her by the shoulders.

"What does this mean?" he demanded.

She looked at him, smiling mischievously. "Don't be angry, Peter dear. You see, you

were away such a long time, I was afraid you'd forgotten all about me."

"Excuse my interrupting," observed the inspector, taking a step forward, "but it's your interests I'm thinking of, Miss Franklyn, and, as Dr. West knows, we haven't a second to spare."

"This is Mr. Jennifer, Jean," I said. "He has just dashed back from Spain in an aeroplane, and I believe he has got something exciting to tell us."

She turned quickly towards him. "I'm awfully glad to meet you," she said. "I'm afraid we've been giving you a frightful lot of trouble."

He imprisoned her small hand in his masssive brown one.

"The pleasure's mutual, miss," he replied, "and as for trouble—well, that happens to be my job." He stood there staring at her admiringly from under his knitted brows. "I've a bit of good news for you, if we're not too late," he continued, "and if ever a young lady deserved a stroke of luck——"

"Who's wasting time now?" demanded Peter blandly.

With an appreciative twinkle in his eye the inspector released his hold.

"You're right, doctor," he said. "Let's get to business."

"How about a drink first?" I suggested. "It's a long journey from Spain by air, and there can't be many pubs on the way."

I splashed him out a generous peg, and, after I had performed a similar service for Peter and myself, we all four seated ourselves round the table.

"There's no need to make a long story of it," he began. "I told Mr. Cameron why I'd decided to go, and, although it seemed a bit of a wild goose chase at the time, we can thank our lucky stars I took the chance." He turned to Jean. "All the same, I owe you a pretty big apology, miss. If I'd known then what I know now about the man we've got to deal with, I'd have had him safe under lock and key before I left England."

"That's all right, Mr. Jennifer," said Jean reassuringly. "I wasn't really frightened—except by the crabs."

The inspector gazed at her for a second, and then took a long draught from his tumbler.

"It was late in the evening when I got to St. Étienne," he continued. "My friend, Congosta, the man I spoke to you about, was waiting for me at the station. He'd made some inquiries already, and, amongst other things, he'd found out that while Medlicot was there he'd spent two or three days at a little village up in the mountains. It's a place called Monterosa, on the old mule-track that they used to use before the present road was made, and I figured it out that it must be somewhere about the spot where Charles Franklyn was killed. Next morning we got hold of a cart and drove up there.

It's a tiny place—just half a dozen stone huts that look as if they'd been built before the flood. The one where Medlicot had stayed belonged to a party called Moreno—a tough-looking old fellow with long white hair and brass ear-rings. He was a trifle suspicious of us at first, but, after Congosta had had a few words with him, he seemed to cotton on to the idea that there might be a bit of money in it. Anyhow, he invited us inside and gave us some stuff he called 'Veno,' which tasted to me uncommonly like red ink. I don't know whether either of you gentlemen know it——"

"I do," said Peter. "I've had it frequently in Soho."

"Well, all I can say is that it's a pretty poisonous dope. Anyhow, we got it down somehow or other, so as not to hurt his feelings, and then, after a lot of jabber and bowing and hand-waving and that sort of thing, we began to come to the point. I put the questions, while Congosta translated them into Spanish, and that way, bit by bit, we got the whole story out of him.

"It seems that last winter, during a bad storm, part of the roof of the hut caved in. While he was messing about, putting things straight, this old party Moreno came across a small iron box. It was stuffed away behind one of the stones in the wall, and had evidently been lying there a goodish time. When he opened it, all he found inside was an empty leather purse

and one or two papers and letters." Mr. Jennifer paused dramatically. "That purse and those papers and letters were once the property of Charles Franklyn."

For a moment we sat staring at him in silence.

"Do you mean to say that they'd been there ever since the accident?" demanded Jean.

"There's not a doubt of it," was the answer. "The folk who found him must have brought his dead body down to that very hut, and I suppose that, after going through his pockets and pinching everything worth taking, they shoved away these few odds and ends on the off-chance that somebody might turn up who was prepared to pay for them. Well, apparently nobody did turn up. I take it that they were too busy with their own affairs in England, and that by the time the war was over the whole thing had been pretty well forgotten."

"By Jove, you're right, Jennifer," I exclaimed. "I don't know who came into the property after Henry Franklyn was killed, but, whoever it was, he'd probably quite enough to do in looking after his own affairs." I paused. "And Moreno showed those papers to Medlicot?" I added.

The inspector nodded. "Yes," he said; "there was no one in the place who could read English, so he asked our friend if he'd be kind enough to have a squint at them. Of course, directly Medlicot saw what they were he was on to it like a weasel. At first he offered to buy

them, but Moreno, who's no fool in his own way, wouldn't agree to that. All he'd allow Medlicot to do was to take a copy, on the understanding that if there was anything to be got out of it, the two of them were to go shares."

He paused to take another pull at his tumbler.

"Oh, please go on," said Jean pleadingly. "I feel I shall burst if you don't."

The inspector smiled. "There's not a great deal more to tell, miss. I left the business end to Congosta—he knows how to deal with Spaniards—and for thirty pounds down, which I took the liberty of speculating on your part, the old man handed us over the whole lot. I didn't waste any time once I'd got 'em. I drove back to St. Étienne, and took the next train to Bordeaux. There I dug up a French pilot, who landed me at Croydon about six o'clock this afternoon. I went first of all to my own place, and, as luck would have it, just as I arrived there, who should ring up but our friend Dr. West. He told me what had been happening here, and I suggested that I'd better pick him up and bring him along with me. We intended, of course, to go to the inn, but while we were crossing the bridge he spotted a light on board the yacht, and we guessed that it must be either you or Mr. Cameron. So we came straight on instead——"

"Show them the letter, Jennifer," interrupted Peter, "and for God's sake let's get to work."

The inspector dived into his inside pocket, and, producing a long envelope, extracted the folded sheet of flimsy-looking paper.

"Read this," he said. "It's the last letter Henry Franklyn ever wrote to his son, and it's been precious near responsible for putting you and this young lady into your coffins."

Opening it out carefully, he placed it on the table in front of me, and, with Jean's curly head bending forward close to mine, I stared down at the crabbed and faded handwriting.

"Bredbridge Abbey,
"In the County of Suffolk,
"*October the Third*, 1643.

"My deare Sonne,—Through the good offices of Sir Wm. Masters, I have receiv'd yr letter writ from Bordeaux, and I thanke Almightie God that it hath pleased Him to keepe you safe.

"My Sonne I doe well understand yr very right and proper wishe that you should return to take arms for His Maiestie against these damnabel rebells, but til you shall be fully restored to goode healthe it is my wille otherwise. Doctor ffothergill doth assure me that in the warm aire of Seville your distemper will soon disperse, and I truste that by such time it will have pleased God that these evil times shall be mended.

"My Sonne I write on a matter which presses heavily on my mind since it concerns

deeply the welfare of you and my other children. Tho His Maiesties affairs doe progress well in the West and North here in the Eastern Counties the rebells are in much number.

"One Captain Cromwell an active Parliament man hath already seized by force the plate of Cambridge Universitie, and since the great value of our own plate is but too well known in this neighbourhood I have by nighte with the helpe of John Bagot who may be trusted even to deathe carried the same to a secure place where it may lie till these evil times be past.

"Lest it should please God to take me in the cause of His Maiestie I have writ directions so that you may know where it lieth. For fear this message shoulde miscarry into others hands I have divided it into alternate letters one half of which I doe now sende you. The other half is writ on the title page of that booke of travels by Master Coryat wch was so favourite reading of yours when a childe. Should aught happen to mee and John Bagot you will find it in the keeping of Mr. Clarke in the Parsonage, when by putting the letters together you will learne where the box is hidden. I pray that such occasion may not arise, but in these evil times it is well to take such care as lies within our power.

"My deare Sonne may Almightie God

have you in His keeping and restore you to healthe. May it please Him to end this wicked warre and preserve mee until such time as mine eyes may again rest upon thee.

"Yr very loving Father,

"HENRY FRANKLYN.

"NHVRCNROTEISNRDTNCI"

I looked up at Jennifer, a curious thrill tingling in my heart.

"Have you worked it out?" I asked quietly.

Without making any reply, he pushed forward another slip of paper. In my eagerness I almost snatched it from his hand, and there, written in pencil in capital letters, I read the following words:

"IN THE VERY CENTRE OF THE FIRS ON BREDSTONE CLIF."

CHAPTER XVIII

JEAN, who had been reading it over my shoulder, looked up with a sudden exclamation.

"Bredstone Cliff!" she repeated. "Why, that's the old name for Bredbridge Hill!"

The inspector leaned forward eagerly. "Isn't that the place where the last owner was killed?"

Jean nodded. "Mr. Ashton, you mean? Yes, he was found lying on the beach below, smashed to pieces."

"Why worry about him?" interjected Peter heartlessly. "While we're sitting here talking, that swine may be digging up the stuff."

"Well, if he is," remarked the inspector, "he'll be saving us a deal of trouble." He turned to me. "If you take my advice, Mr. Cameron, you and Miss Franklyn will come back with me to Town, and to-morrow morning I'll get a warrant for the arrest of Medlicot and the two Gulls on a charge of attempted murder."

I shook my head. "I'm going along to have a look at those firs," I said. "I want to find out what's happened to Jean's property."

"So do I," said Peter, jumping up from his seat.

Mr. Jennifer shrugged his shoulders. "I think you're making a mistake," he replied. "It's taking a lot of unnecessary risk, in my opinion, and I don't see that there's anything particular to be gained by it." He paused. "Still," he added, "I'm working for you in this affair, and if you've made up your minds to go, why, of course, I'll come with you."

Jean swung herself off the bunk. "Then we may as well start at once," she observed cheerfully.

"But we can't take you, miss!" exclaimed the inspector. "That's out of the question."

She looked up at him indignantly. "You don't suppose I'm going to be left behind?"

"Oh, let her come, Jennifer," I said. "She knows the place, and she'll be quite safe with us."

"I'd put it the other way round," objected Peter. "I should say we'd be a damned sight safer with her."

The inspector stared at all three of us for a moment, and then, picking up his glass, finished off the dregs. "Have it your own way, gentlemen," he said; "only don't blame me if anything goes wrong."

Without further discussion, I led the way on deck, where, under the soft light of an almost full moon, everything looked incongruously quiet and peaceful.

"You'd better let me row," said Peter, pitching away his cigarette. "I seem to be the only one who's had a really restful day."

He brought round the dinghy, which was just large enough to hold all four of us, and in a queer silence, broken alone by the splash of the oars, we made our way back to the deserted hard.

As we got out and were mounting the bank the inspector ranged himself up alongside me.

"You recollect what I told you about Medlicot?" he said in a low voice. "Well, I don't know if it's struck you, but, looking back on the whole thing now, it's my belief that as likely as not he murdered his cousin."

"I shouldn't be surprised." I said. "For anyone who's given to that sort of thing, Bredbridge Hall must be a pretty strong inducement."

"It hasn't done him much good," was the answer. "You can generally reckon, however, that if a man brings off one murder successfully, sooner or later he'll try it again."

"I'm not an expert on insanity," I said, "but in my opinion Medlicot's as mad as a hatter."

The inspector grunted. "There's method in his madness, anyhow. If this plate came out of the Abbey, I'll lay odds that it's worth a mint of money. I was helping Traill in the Duffield case, when those chalices and crucifixes were stolen, and I went along to the British Museum and studied up the whole subject. I can tell you that some of this old church stuff is practically priceless."

"That's good news," I said contentedly. "I shall make Jean pay for the aeroplane."

"I daresay she won't object," returned the inspector drily, "not if we're all lucky enough to come back with a whole skin."

He trudged on beside me in silence till we reached the gap which led out into the roadway, where we halted for a moment to wait for Peter and Jean, who were following us. A few yards farther along, a motor-car, with its side-lamps burning, was standing on the grass.

"You know the way best, miss," remarked the inspector, "so perhaps you wouldn't mind sitting in front with me?"

With a nod of her head, Jean stepped forward, while, obedient to his suggestion, Peter and I took our places at the back.

"It's not very far," said Jean in a whisper. "Take the first turning to the left, and go straight on until I tell you to stop."

Switching on his engine, Mr. Jennifer started off down the road. We passed the tall iron gates of the lodge, standing up black and lonely between their twin pillars, and, with the wood on one side of us and the park wall on the other, followed the narrow, ill-kept lane which wound away in the direction of the sea.

About a couple of hundred yards from the corner it twisted sharply to the right, and, abandoning any further pretences, degenerated rapidly into a mere cart-track. At the cost of some personal discomfort, however, we continued to bump along over its uneven ruts, until, after about ten minutes' driving, the trees, which obscured our view, came to an end, and with a final jolt we lurched out into the open. Massive and solitary Bredbridge Hill rose up before us, its gaunt clump of firs outlined against the sky.

Putting out her hand, Jean touched the inspector's arm.

"This is the best place to stop," she said. "There's a path from here straight up to the top."

Mr. Jennifer nodded. "I'll just turn her

round first, miss. Then we shall be ready when we want to get away."

He made a short circle over the rough grass, and, bringing the car to a standstill, leaned forward and switched off his lights. As he did so, the other three of us slipped quietly out.

"Isn't the Gulls' cottage somewhere about here?" I whispered to Jean.

She pointed to what looked like a small spinney on the westward side of the hill.

"It's down there, behind those trees, facing the river. They can't see us unless they're out on the marsh."

I felt a tap on my shoulder, and, turning round, I found the inspector standing beside me. In his hand were a couple of heavy spanners.

"You'd better take one of these each," he said. "It's a useful sort of thing when you're arguing with a lunatic."

"How about you?" I inquired.

He tapped his hip pocket. "Oh, I'm all right. I've got a little friend here if he's wanted, but we mustn't have any of that, not unless it's absolutely necessary."

He presented the second spanner to Peter.

"Now, doctor," he added, "you and I will lead the way, and try to be as quiet about it as you can. If there's anyone messing around up there, we ought to be able to hear them, even if we can't see them." He turned to Jean. "Stick close to Mr. Cameron, miss, and, no

matter what happens, you do exactly as he tells you."

Falling into our allotted rôle, Jean and I followed silently as the two of them set off up the slope. Although no doubt simple enough by daylight, it was an awkward and steepish climb in the dark. In spite of her long swim, however, Jean seemed to find no difficulty in keeping pace with the rest of us, and before the others had been at the top for more than a few minutes we crawled up noiselessly behind them. Twenty yards away stood the firs, their dark branches rocking about gently in the wind.

Mr. Jennifer, who was crouching close to the ground, glanced back over his shoulder.

"Seems to be quiet enough," he said in a whisper. "You stop here, and I'll go on and have a look."

There was a general protest from all three of us.

"I think we'd better stick together," I said. "If anything happened to you, I should be terrified to face your sister."

"Besides," added Peter, "what's the use of my carting about this infernal spanner unless I'm going to be allowed a chance to use it?"

With a twitch of his grim mouth, the inspector rose to his feet.

"Come along then," he said curtly, and scrambling up together, we advanced in a body towards the straggling undergrowth of gorse and brambles.

Jennifer, who had kept slightly in front, pushed his way in first. I heard a half-stifled exclamation break from his lips, and the next moment we were standing at the edge of a small open space on which the moonlight streamed down through the black and swaying tree-tops. In the very centre, flanked by a pile of newly dug earth, gaped a large, empty hole.

Peter gave a short laugh.

"It's our own fault," he said. "We shouldn't have been so damned chatty!"

Without offering any reply, the inspector walked quickly forward.

"We ought to make sure that there's no one about," I said. "You look after Jean, Peter, while I do a bit of scouting."

I crossed over to the opposite side, and, spanner in hand, groped my way stealthily through the bushes until I came out into the open moonlight beyond.

I was standing within a stone's throw of the cliff's edge, while down beneath me on the right a broad pathway of dancing silver stretched away to the distant horizon. Not a sail was in sight, and the only sound I could hear was the faint splash and murmur of the waves as they broke on the beach a hundred feet below.

I was on the very point of moving forward when I was checked abruptly by a sudden uncanny sense of danger. I make no claim to being psychic or anything of that sort, but so strong

was the feeling that without a moment's hesitation I crouched down instinctively amongst the shadow of the bushes.

One—two—perhaps three seconds passed, and then over the brow of the hill to my left came the figure of a man. Even if the moon had not been shining full upon his face, I should have recognised him at once by his peaked cap and his great breadth of shoulder. It was Captain Gull—the brute who had flung me overboard to drown and die in the North Sea.

I felt my fingers tighten on the spanner as I crouched there tense and motionless. Apart from Medlicot himself, there was no one in the world with whom I was more anxious to have a few minutes' private conversation, and, but for the risk of spoiling my own enjoyment, I could have laughed aloud from sheer pleasure.

I thought at first that he was coming straight for the bushes, but, on reaching the summit he turned off slowly in the direction of the cliff. A few paces brought him to the edge, and, pulling up almost at the highest point, he stood with his back towards me, looking out to sea.

Very carefully I got up from my hiding-place. The rubber soles which I was wearing made no sound on the thick grass, and, creeping forward, step by step, I drew nearer and nearer to where he was standing. When I was within about three yards of him, I halted.

"Good evening, Gull," I said pleasantly.

At the sound of my voice he spun round like a man struck by a bullet. I just had time to see his staring eyes and the ghastly look of horror in his face, and then, with a hoarse cry, he lurched backwards and disappeared into space.

Utterly stupefied by the suddenness of the whole thing, I remained there for a moment as if glued to the spot. Before I could move there was a crash of footsteps in the undergrowth behind me, and the next instant Peter, Jennifer, and Jean all came rushing out into the open.

"What was it?" demanded the inspector. "What's happened?"

With a masterly effort I managed to pull myself together.

"It was Gull, the skipper," I said. "He was standing here right on the edge of the cliff. I came out to have a little chat with him, and when he saw me he was so surprised that he fell over. I think he must have taken me for a ghost."

Mr. Jennifer gripped my arm. "Fell over!" he repeated. "Do you mean to say that he's dead?"

"Well, it can't have done him much good, anyhow," broke in Peter. "Perhaps we'd better go down and have a look."

The inspector was about to speak again when Jean stepped forward.

"Oh, do hurry up!" she exclaimed impetuously. "He may be alive still, and it's dreadful to think of him lying there all smashed and helpless."

She darted off towards the crest of the hill, and in another minute the whole four of us were plunging recklessly down a precipitous grass slope, at the foot of which stood a tiny thatched cottage.

I could see a light burning in the front window as we passed, but, without stopping to investigate, we hurried on down to the shore, and turned off along the beach under the shadow of the cliff. There, not thirty yards from the landward end of the groyne, our search ended.

He was lying face downwards on the sand, with his legs sprawled out at a horrible and grotesque angle. One arm was doubled underneath him, and, when Peter knelt down and very gently turned him over, I saw a little thread of blood trickling from both ears.

Mr. Jennifer was the first to speak. "Dead, I suppose?" he inquired curtly.

Peter, who was bending forward with professional intentness, shook his head. "Not quite," he replied. "His heart's still beating, and it's just possible he may recover consciousness." He looked up to where one or two stunted trees jutted out from a fissure in the cliff. "He must have caught himself in those bushes, and I suppose they broke his fall." He paused.

"There's no hope though, of course," he added. "It's merely a matter of a few minutes."

As he spoke, a sudden spasm passed across the dying man's face, and with a faint moan he opened his eyes.

"What's this?" he muttered. "Where the hell am I?"

Peter leaned down again. "Keep quite still," he said; "it's no use trying to move. You've fallen over the cliff and hurt yourself pretty badly."

"Fallen over the cliff," came a hoarse whisper. "Aye, that's so. That's——" His eyes, which were wandering slowly round, fixed themselves rigidly on mine.

"Yes, I'm alive all right, Gull," I said. "It wasn't a ghost you saw."

With his under-jaw hanging open, he lay staring at me dumbly.

A queer sense of pity stirred in my heart, and I knelt down beside him.

"Why did you throw me overboard?" I asked. "For the sake of the money?"

He shook his head feebly.

"You know well enough," he muttered.

"I'm hanged if I do," I said. "I came down here to stop Medlicot stealing that treasure you've just dug up, which belongs to Miss Franklyn. I'd nothing against you; I didn't even know you existed."

His eyes opened in a stupid, half-incredulous amazement.

"God Almighty," he whispered. "Are you speaking true?"

"I swear it," I said, "on my honour."

The two great veins which stood out upon his forehead swelled up as though they would burst, and for a moment he lay there breathing heavily. Then with an effort he moistened his lips.

"You're a doctor," he said to Peter. "Tell me straight, sir; I'm done for, ain't I?"

Peter nodded. "You may perhaps live a quarter of an hour," he said. "I can't promise you even that."

"You hear what he says, Gull," broke in the inspector, who up till then had been standing by in silence. "You've nothing to fear from us, so tell us the truth, man. Don't go before your Maker with a lie upon your soul."

A bitter, husky laugh echoed from the skipper's throat.

"I ain't worryin' about the next world," he jerked out slowly. "I've had my hell in this. I've been in the devil's hands for two years, and——" His voice was choked by a sudden fit of coughing.

Jennifer stooped down. "You mean Medlicot?"

"Aye, that's who I mean." He spat out a clot of blood. "If it hadn't been for him I'd never have killed Ashton."

There was a brief silence.

"You killed Ashton?" said the inspector quietly.

"I killed him right enough. Flung him over the cliff like the dirty dog 'e was."

"Why?"

The big fists clenched themselves helplessly. "He'd shamed my gel—shamed and ruined her for 'is own blasted pleasure. She didn't say nothing to me—just walked out into the sea and drowned herself. 'Twas Medlicot that told me who the man was. Showed me a letter that my gel had wrote to 'is cousin, and I never guessed the black purpose in 'is heart—not till it was too late."

"By God, but that was cunning!" exclaimed the inspector, with a kind of professional relish. "He led you on to kill Ashton, so that he should inherit the property?"

"You said it." Another rasping cough brought the blood to Gull's lips, and for a moment I thought that the end had come. "Led me on right enough," he gasped, "and ever since then I been in his hands—body and soul." He clutched feebly at my sleeve. "Lied to me about you, 'e did—otherwise I'd never had no part in that business."

"What did he say?" I asked.

"Said you'd got on to the notion that I'd killed Ashton, and that if we didn't put you away it would all come out."

"Well, in that case," I replied, "one can hardly blame you for having a shot at it." I

paused. "Look here, Gull," I added, with a sudden inspiration. "I don't bear you any malice. You tell me what you've done with this stuff of Miss Franklyn's, and we'll shake hands and part friends."

"I'll tell you," came the answer, in a hoarse whisper. "It's aboard *The Flying Cloud*—that's where it is. 'E's sailing with it as soon as the tide serves—making for——"

"Jim! Jim! Quick!"

Jean's voice rang out in a warning cry, and with a simultaneous start we all leaped to our feet.

In the shadow of the cliff, not a dozen yards away, a black, silent object was creeping stealthily towards us. As we turned, it suddenly sprang out into the moonlight, and there, glaring up at us with bared teeth and red, bloodshot eyes, crouched the huge, distorted figure of the hunchback.

With a dying effort Gull struggled up on one elbow. "Hold on, lad," he gasped. "'Taint them you got to reckon with. 'Tis that foul devil Medlicot——"

His jaw dropped, and, leaving the sentence unfinished, he rolled over limply on the sand.

At the first sound of his father's voice the murderous rage in the cripple's face had turned to a bewildered stare. For a moment he stood there, swaying stupidly on his bowed legs, his head thrust forward and his great shoulders

hunched. Then, like the sudden rush of a wild beast, he hurled himself in between Peter and myself, and, with a horrible, half-human cry, dropped down beside the prostrate body.

Peter wiped his forehead. "My aunt!" he muttered. "But we *are* seeing life, and no mistake."

"It's a pity," said Mr. Jennifer regretfully. "I'd like to have had him in the dock, just to make the case complete." He paused, "However," he added, a little more brightly, "he's given us some useful information, even if he is dead."

"Well, for goodness' sake let's act on it," I exclaimed. "We know where the stuff is, and——"

"How do you propose to get on board?" interrupted the inspector.

"Why, in Gull's dinghy," I retorted. "It must be lying about somewhere close by."

"We'd never do it," he objected, shaking his head. "He'd be bound to see us coming out from the shore, and what chance should we have then? You can't deal with an armed lunatic like that; he could shoot us down as easily as potting rabbits."

"I've got it," said Peter. "Why shouldn't we go back to the inn and pinch the motor-boat? He won't know who we are then, until we get right alongside."

The inspector nodded approvingly. "That's a more possible idea," he admitted.

"But what are we going to do about poor Captain Gull?" said Jean. "We can't leave him lying here on the beach."

I looked down at the hunchback, who, without paying any attention to us, was crouching beside the dead body, hugging it fiercely in his arms.

"Ben will stay with him for the present, Jean," I said. "If we try to move him now, there may be a bit of a scuffle."

"There'll be a hell of a scuffle," said Peter emphatically.

"Mr. Cameron's right, miss," put in the inspector. "That plate of yours is what we want to get hold of, and it's no use wasting time over a dead man. As soon as we've settled with Medlicot we'll come back and take him to the cottage."

Leaving the wretched, half-witted cripple to his silent grief, we made our way hastily back along the shore. As we again approached the cottage, I saw that the front door was now wide open, and by the light of an oil lamp inside I caught a glimpse of a roughly furnished living-room, with nets and a couple of old fowling pieces hanging against the wall.

It struck me as extremely fortunate that Ben had omitted to provide himself with one of the latter, but, without pausing to discuss the subject, we turned off round the base of the hill, and hurried down the path to where we had left the car.

Whether it was an intentional piece of consideration on Peter's part I can't say, but somehow or other I found myself in the back seat with Jean. She was breathing a little quickly, and for the first time since I had known her I saw a suspicion of tears in her eyes.

"Very tired?" I whispered, slipping my arm round her.

She shook her head. "I was thinking about Gull and poor Ben. You see, I've known them all my life, Jim, and I'm sure they didn't mean any harm to me—not really."

"I don't believe Gull knew anything about it," I said. "It was just a devilish idea of Medlicot's own, shoving you in the tower. He had to get somebody to help him, and, of course, a half-witted creature who can't talk was exactly the right person."

She nodded. "He looked dreadful when he jumped out at us," she said with a little shiver. "I shouldn't like to be Medlicot—not if Ben understood what his father said to him."

"Ben will have to wait his turn," I observed. "He's welcome to what's left after Peter and I have finished."

More from necessity than choice, we relapsed into silence, for the car was already bumping along over the rough track in a fashion that rendered any further conversation practically impossible. Being covered with bruises where I had knocked myself against the cage, every jolt seemed to find out some fresh and more tender

spot, and, although I managed to restrain my emotions, I was certainly not sorry when we at last reached the lane, and, rounding the lodge corner, emerged into the main road.

In another minute we drew up outside "The Green Man," where, to judge by appearances, everyone was sound asleep. The windows in front were all in darkness and all tightly closed, the two on the ground floor being additionally secured by old-fashioned wooden shutters.

"There's no need to wake Sam," said Jean in a whisper. We can get the boat easily enough, and I know there's some petrol on board. He told me so the other day, in case I wanted to use her."

She conducted us through a narrow archway into a yard behind, where a low, padlocked gate gave access to the back garden. We climbed over, and, picking our way between glass frames, empty beer crates, and various other miscellaneous obstacles, came out on to a ramshackle wharf, alongside which lay a small weather-beaten motor-launch.

"She doesn't look up to much," observed Jean, "but she can travel all right when she once starts." She turned to me. "You'd better take the wheel, Jim, and I'll sit by and keep an eye on the engine."

"Can't Jennifer and I do anything helpful?" inquired Peter.

"Of course you can," said Jean. "You can spread yourselves out and hide us."

I unhitched the rope, and, waiting until the others had taken their places, stepped in after them. There was a momentary delay while I wrestled with the starting-handle, and then, with a vicious jerk, the engine suddenly began to function, and we spluttered out swiftly into the centre of the river.

"Well, we're in for it now," muttered the inspector, who was sitting next me. "I don't want to be a wet blanket, but I tell you frankly, Mr. Cameron, that this foolhardy business is entirely against my better judgment."

"What else can we do?" I objected. "If Medlicot once got out to sea with the treasure and found that he was being followed, he'd probably chuck the whole lot overboard."

The inspector nodded gloomily. "There's something in what you say," he admitted. "All the same, a man with a gun's a pretty ugly proposition, especially when he's wanted on a charge of attempted murder."

"Well, you've got a gun too," I replied. "If you've any official scruples about shedding blood, Peter or I——"

Mr. Jennifer shook his head. "I shall shoot quick enough if it's necessary," he said grimly. "It would ease my mind a good deal, though, if we hadn't got that young lady on board."

As he spoke we rounded the first bend, and a long, empty stretch of moonlit water opened out before us. Ahead, on the right,

rose the chimneys and gables of Bredbridge Hall.

Peter, who was chewing an unlighted cigarette, tilted himself lazily in our direction.

"What's the programme exactly?" he inquired.

"There's only one thing to do," I said. "Run straight alongside and grab hold of the rail. Jean will take the wheel while the rest of us jump on board."

Jean, who was kneeling up, staring forward over the bows, gave a sudden exclamation.

"Look, Jim, look!" she exclaimed. "Out there beyond the point!"

The inspector started up abruptly. "What is it?" he demanded.

She pointed towards a slim black spar, which stood out clearly against the sky.

"*The Flying Cloud's* top-mast. It's moving, Jim! She's going down the river!"

With a low whistle Peter sprang to his feet. "My God, you're right! The swine's done us after all!"

"Done us be damned!" cried Jean recklessly. "He can't get more than seven knots out of her, and we can do twelve." She dropped down beside me, her hands clenched, her eyes shining with excitement. "Let her out, Jim! Let her out for all she's worth."

I opened the throttle to its fullest extent, and I could feel the hull quiver as we surged suddenly forward.

"You'd better get out that revolver of yours, Jennifer," I said. "It will come in handy in about two minutes."

With a white-crested wave foaming away each side of our bow, we raced on towards the next bend. Having already negotiated it three times, I remembered the place well—a tricky and dangerous curve sweeping away sharply to the right, almost in the shape of a horseshoe. Awkward as it was, however, I made no attempt to slacken speed. We churned our way round in a smother of flying spray, and, missing an old derelict punt by the merest fraction, shot out into the broad reach that ran down to the entrance.

There, right in front of us, and not more than two hundred yards distant, was *The Flying Cloud*. She was driving straight down the centre of the river, with a wave of white foam spreading out behind her, while gripping the tiller, and turning back every now and then to glance over his shoulder, stood the solitary figure of Medlicot.

From where Jean was sitting came a low, satisfied laugh.

"We shall catch him, Jim, just before he reaches the channel."

I heard the click of Jennifer's revolver, and from the corner of my eye I saw him edging himself along the seat.

"Keep down, miss," he muttered gruffly. "It won't help me to have your brains all over the boat."

Nearer and nearer we drew, until at last the gold lettering on the yacht's stern was clearly visible in the bright moonlight. Every time now that Medlicot looked round to measure the distance between us we could see his face more and more clearly. As far as any trace of fear or excitement was concerned, it might have been a smiling mask.

We were about thirty yards behind when suddenly, with a quick movement, he lashed the tiller. As he swung round I caught the gleam of something bright in his right hand, and at the same instant a hoarse shout of warning broke from the inspector.

Then for a moment my heart seemed to stop beating.

From the well of the yacht an enormous, misshapen figure rose up silently into the moonlight, and, with an ape-like bound, reached the spot where Medlicot was standing. Clutching him round the waist with a grip of steel it swung him bodily from the deck. A hideous, strangled cry rang out above the beat of the engines, and, stumbling sideways against the low rail, the two of them crashed over together and disappeared beneath the water.

CHAPTER XIX

I PUT down the helm, and, chugging slowly round in a half-circle, we came up with the tide.

"It's no use hunting about any longer, Jennifer," I said. "They must be half a mile out to sea by this time."

The inspector, who was kneeling in the bows, peering over into the swiftly running current, looked up with a dissatisfied grunt.

"I'm afraid you're right," he admitted reluctantly. "If they were anywhere around here we should have spotted them by now." He took off his hat and mopped his forehead with his sleeve. "We'd best get back to the yacht and find out what the others are up to."

I glanced across at *The Flying Cloud*, which was lying at anchor under the opposite bank. There was no sign of Jean for the moment, but I could see Peter plainly enough stooping down over the chain.

"Don't look so depressed, Jennifer," I said encouragingly. "It's very annoying, of course, but, after all, what else could we do? We had to get hold of the yacht first, otherwise she'd have smashed herself to pieces against the groyne."

"It's myself I'm blaming, not you," he replied. "I never reckoned on that damned hunchback cutting in and spoiling the whole

show. Even now I can't quite see what he was driving at. If he went back to kill Medlicot why didn't he do it directly he got on board?"

"I don't suppose he had the chance," I said. "When he turned up alone and all covered in blood, Medlicot must have guessed that something pretty queer had been happening ashore. No doubt he made up his mind to clear out at once, and our friend Ben was just hanging around waiting his opportunity. He'd have known right enough that Medlicot carried a revolver."

Mr. Jennifer grunted again.

"Well, it's going to make a nice flare-up in the Press, all this business," he observed, "not to mention what the authorities will have to say on the subject. With a buried treasure and three dead men to account for——"

"Oh, there's bound to be a bit of fuss, of course," I interrupted. "We shall have our pictures in all the illustrated papers, but, apart from that, I don't see that they can do anything very horrible to us. I suppose you'll get on to the police right away?"

He nodded. "I just want to make sure what there is on the yacht; then I shall go along to the inn and ring up the station officer at Eastport. We must have him over at once, and give him a full statement of the facts."

"We seem to be in for a busy night of it," I replied. "I only hope to goodness that Medlicot had some whisky on board."

We ran up alongside *The Flying Cloud*, where Peter, hatless and somewhat dishevelled, was standing in the bows awaiting our approach.

"Nothing doing?" he inquired.

"Not a sign of them," I said. "With a tide like this, it was hopeless from the very start." I handed him up the painter, and followed the inspector, who had already climbed on board. "Where's Jean?" I asked.

He jerked his head towards the cabin. "Having a hunt round for the boodle. I was just going down to see whether she's had any luck."

As he spoke, Jean herself appeared at the top of the companion, and with a hasty movement the inspector pushed his way forward.

"Have you found it, miss?" he demanded.

"Yes," she said; "it's all here. He must have been unpacking it just when Ben came on board."

Mr. Jennifer's expression brightened amazingly. "Well, that sounds promising, anyhow," he remarked. "You come along and show me where it is, miss, and I'll run my eye over it before I go ashore."

All the lights were burning in the big main cabin when we entered the doorway, where, with a queer, shaky little laugh, Jean, who was leading the way, came to a sudden halt.

"There you are!" she said. "That's what three people have been killed for!"

She pointed to a jumbled litter of black and

tarnished objects, some of which stood upon the table, while others, still half unwrapped, were lying about the floor beside a rusty iron chest. Judging by a first glance, they seemed to consist chiefly of curiously shaped cups and flagons.

I took Jean's hand and drew her towards the nearest bunk.

"You've done your bit for this evening, Jean," I said. "You sit here and rest while Mr. Jennifer has a look at them."

Unresistingly she obeyed my instructions, and, dropping down thankfully beside her, I lay back and watched the inspector.

For a man of his reserved nature he appeared to be distinctly agitated. He was leaning over the table, his big face flushed and excited, picking up one article after another and staring at each of them in turn with a kind of half-hypnotised fascination.

"Well, Jennifer," I said at last, "what's the verdict?"

"My word!" he said, in an almost awed voice, "but there's no question about the value of this stuff. Why, it's Norman-French, most of it—eighth or ninth century, unless I'm mistaken! There's one cup of the same period in the British Museum that's worth twenty thousand pounds. Look at this"—with a kind of reverent care he held out a dinted and blackened bowl—"see the leopard's head here—that's about the oldest mark in the world.

There's so little of it in existence you could ask practically anything you liked for it."

"Here, steady on," interrupted Peter, "steady on! You're making me feel quite faint." He turned to Jean, who was sitting bolt upright on the bunk, clutching my hand tightly in hers. "I hope you haven't committed yourself too far, Jean," he added mischievously. "With all this money, you'll be able to look a lot higher than Jim."

She moistened her lips. "Is it really mine?" she asked. "Do you think——"

"Don't you worry yourself, miss," broke in the inspector. "It will have to be gone into legally, but you can take it from me that you're on a dead certain winner. These things were the property of Henry Franklyn, and as you're the last of the family they naturally belong to you. No one can get over that—not even a Crown lawyer."

"Hear! Hear!" exclaimed Peter approvingly. "It's all yours, my dear child, including even this elegant iron box."

"Don't be silly, Peter," said Jean. "You and Mr. Jennifer must have a share, of course." She turned to me. "We don't want to be too rich, do we Jim?"

"Certainly not," I agreed. "With the present income tax, it would be a half-yearly agony."

Very carefully the inspector put down the bowl which he was still holding in his hands.

"Thank you, miss," he said slowly, "thank

you very much indeed. I am a poor hand at making pretty speeches, but if you'll pardon my saying so, you're the best sportsman and the pluckiest young lady in the whole of England."

"I don't call that bad for a beginner," said Peter, laughing.

Buttoning his coat, the inspector stepped briskly forward.

"Well, I'll be getting along to the inn," he observed. "Perhaps one of you gentlemen——"

"I'll run you down in the launch," said Peter. "I think I can work it, and I'm quite sure that Jim would rather stop here."

I glanced across at him gratefully. "I don't know how you guessed it, Peter," I said, "but, as a matter of fact, you're perfectly correct."

. . . . . .

Jean lay silent for a few moments, her grey eyes looking up into mine.

"I wonder if the monks would mind," she whispered.

"Mind what?" I asked.

"Why, if we bought back Bredbridge Hall."

"Of course they wouldn't," I said. "After two years of a man like Medlicot, they'd be only too pleased to see one of the old family back again."

"And you wouldn't be bored, Jim—living there all alone with me?"

I pulled down her jersey—or, rather, my

jersey—and kissed the tip of her soft round shoulder.

"It would have to be quick," I said. "I don't think we shall be alone very long."

With a little contented laugh she snuggled up still closer in my arms.

"Oh, Jim, I'm so happy! It's a wonderful feeling finding a treasure—especially when you know that it really belongs to you."

I kissed her again.

"You're quite right, Jean," I said. "I was just thinking the same myself."

THE END

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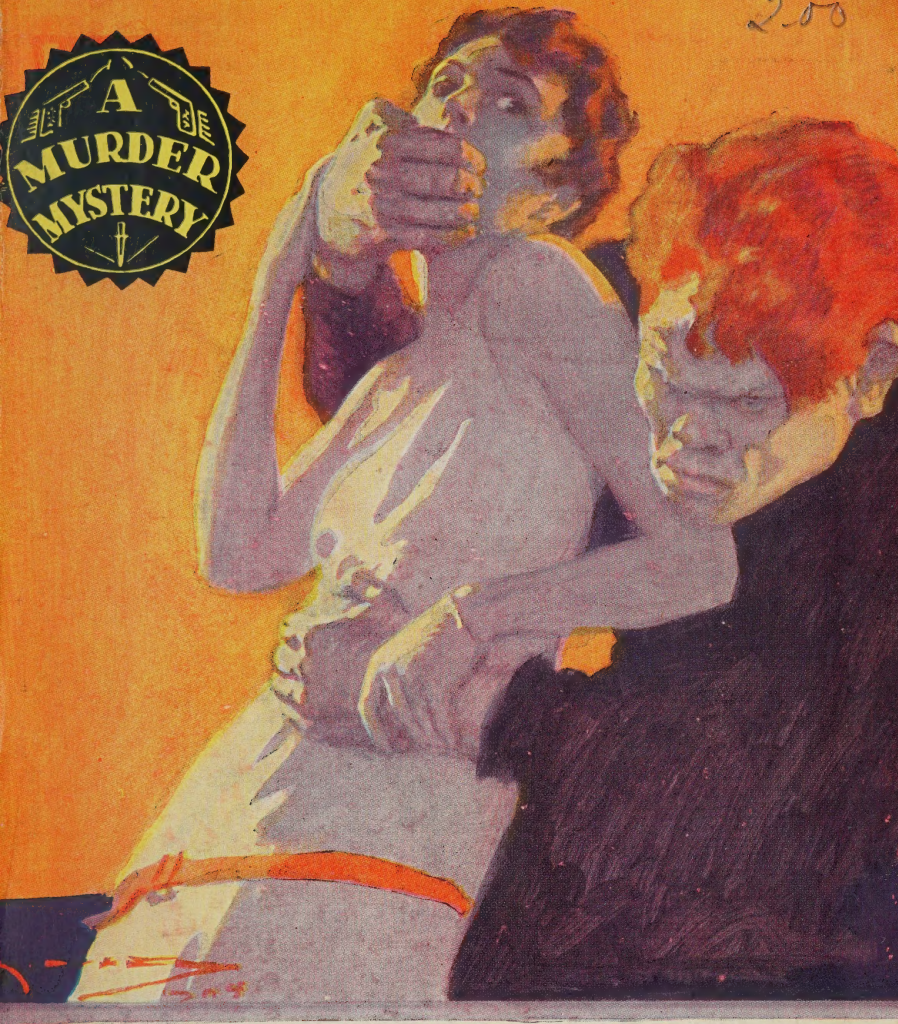

THE SECRET OF THE CREEK

VICTOR BRIDGES